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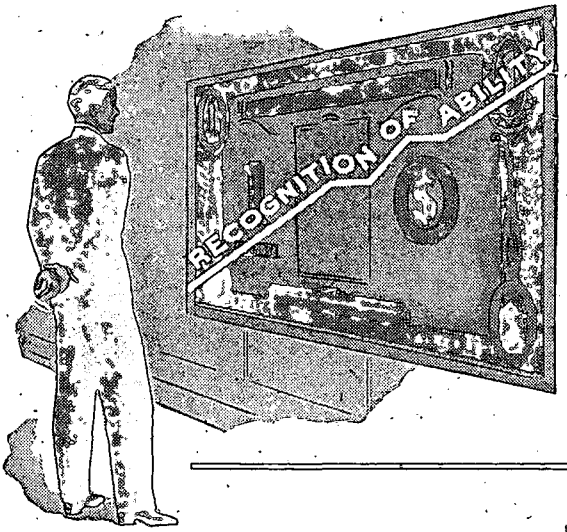

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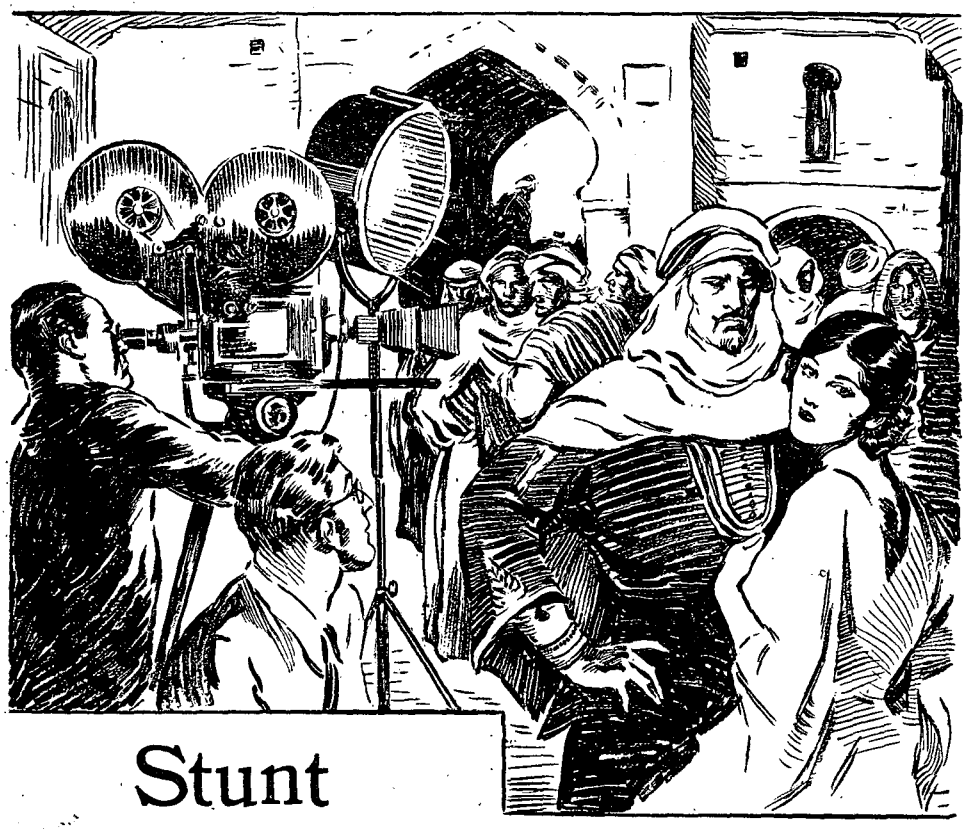

Stunt Man

By EUSTACE L. ADAMS

Author of "Revolution—With Pictures," "The Big Wind Blows," etc.

CHAPTER I

DOUBLE—OR NOTHING

OF COURSE I knew I looked like this sweet-smelling, tight-collared screen idol, Dexter Hathaway. Every stunt man in Hollywood knows his own type. He knows, too, which of the stars he can double for in the close and medium shots. Guy Henrix and I did most of the bumps for Hathaway. The roughest thing he had ever done without a double was to trip over a bear-skin rug during a clinch scene with Maida Watkins. So when Guy Henrix fractured two vertebrae doing a motor car crash for Mammoth Features, I was not surprised to be asked to take some falls for Dexter Hathaway.

The only thing that really surprised me was the way the offer came about. I did not know, then, how long and how far I was supposed to fall for him. I did not know that no foot of film would ever record those falls. And there were other things I did not know. For instance, that my taking of the job automatically doomed him to death just as certainly as if I were putting a gun to his head and pulling the trigger.

Dexter Hathaway—the one who

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Beginning a new novel of Hollywood, of men who risk their lives that stars may shine

made such an extraordinary hit in those first pictures—is dead and by this time the sharks have polished off his bones. Yet Dexter Hathaway is still making pictures in Hollywood. Not quite the same kind of pictures, perhaps, but pictures all the same. They are a little harder-boiled, these later releases, and according to the critics, men don't hate Hathaway as they once did when his way of clinching with Maida Watkins was something to see.

Have you noticed this change in the Hathaway-Watkins pictures? Well, hitch up your chair and listen. The papers didn't tell half the story about that night on the Pacific when blood dripped through the engine room gratings of the yacht Adventurer, and a new motion picture star was created. So here it is—in the unexpurgated version.

* * *

I WAS at the Knickerbrocker bar, hoisting a couple by way of celebration because that morning I had fallen off a cliff for Cecil Montague—and could still walk. I was waiting for Sleepy Smith to celebrate with me, and when the two of us got together to celebrate, we celebrated.

Erl Gorley came scuttling in through the lobby entrance and made his way straight over to me. Erl Gorley was

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Dexter Hathaway's secretary. He was about thirty, pale and prematurely white-headed. His gray-green eyes looked like buttons of ice lying on a china plate.

"Jerry Banning!" he said. "I've been looking all over town for you. Mr. Hathaway is out in his car. He has a job for you."

"Since when," I asked, "do actors cast their own pictures? Have his director call my agent sometime. He knows the number."

Maybe that was two highballs talking. Or maybe it was a hunch. Anyway, I regarded the idea of taking another job right then with no enthusiasm at all.

"Listen, Jerry," Erl Gorley murmured. "This isn't a picture. It's something pretty special, and there's a lot of dough in it for you."

More out of curiosity than anything else, I went out to Hathaway's car. It was a purple limousine and smelled like a blonde's boudoir. I stopped at the open door and looked in at the star, who languidly beckoned for me to get in. But I remained standing where I was.

Once again I was struck by the close resemblance between us. Lord only knew where this lily got his broad shoulders. Certainly it was not by throwing around anything heavier than a load of love and kisses. I got my narrow waist from good hard exercise and not eating too often. Sometimes not eating often enough. He got his, I guess, from the knuckles of a masseur.

But it was his face that always astonished me, it looked so much like mine.

His nose was prominent, differing mainly from mine in that mine had a slight slant to windward on account of an engine that smacked me in *Wings Over Hell.* His chin was jutting, like mine, too, except that the timer of that same OXX had cut a ragged gash on the left side of my jaw and the mark of it still showed. But his hair was dark—only a couple of shades darker than mine. And his eyes were almost exactly the same shade of blue as mine. Put it this way: We were both of a common type. There were probably a thousand others hanging around here and there, and no bargains at any price. But this egg had taken a half million dollars worth of care of his, while I let mine get slapped around quite a lot.

"Get in, Jerry," he said. "I want to talk to you."

I didn't see what I had to lose, so I got in. You know that snakelike road through the Laurel Canyon? Whoopee Highway, it is called by some of the more unkind spirits, on account of the things that go on in some of those twenty-room and twenty-bath cottages that are perched along the cliffs of the overhanging mountains. Up that highway we purred, with Hathaway on my port and Erl Gorley on my starboard, and none of us saying anything.

At the top of the Canyon Road there is another winding highway branching off to the left which follows the ridge of the Santa Monica Mountains most of the way to the ocean. This we took and about twenty minutes later we pulled up at Hathaway's house, newest and gaudiest of all the modernistic estates built there by the movie folk.

And here is a queer thing: For no understandable reason, I hated to go into this place. Oh, it was nice enough to look at. All that money could buy, and all that architects and gardeners could imagine, had been done for this house. Yet somehow its square windows stared down at me with a definitely unfriendly look. The whole great

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building—which must have covered an acre of ground—seemed to say to me, "Get out of here, guy."

If I had been on a lot, or on location, and planning out the timing on a bone-breaking stunt, I would have paid strict attention to the jangle of warning that sounded through all my nerves. But here—well, after all, what could happen to me here? So I went in, thus bringing the death of one of the screen's greatest idols definitely closer. And that of several others, too, believe me!

YOU could have staged a pretty fair football game in Hathaway's living room. It was that big, that high-of ceiling. Like his car, it was all in purple and chromium, with a dash of white here and there. Even the Venetian blinds were purple with white tapes.

Hathaway walked over to the wall, pushed aside an etching, and exposed a small safe. He spun the dial, swung the door and pulled out, of all things, a small humidor, from which he extracted a cigarette. I happened to glance at Erl Gorley and he was watching his employer with a queer intentness, an eagerness, almost, as if he might be waiting for that cigarette to explode in Hathaway's face. The actor took a shin-deep inhale and relaxed into one of the big chairs.

"You explain it, Erl," he said, tilting his head back and dragging in another deep breath of the smoke.

"How," said Erl Gorley, swinging his round, ice-blue eyes to me, "would you like to earn five thousand dollars a month for twelve months?"

"Five times twelve," I said slowly, "is sixty. Sixty grand! For that you could get a dozen stunt men who would flap their arms and fly to the moon. What's the hook in it?"

"It's dangerous," Erl Gorley said.

"I knew that," I said, dryly. "What else?"

"There's at least a possibility," Gorley said, watching me with those frozen-pointed eyes, "that you might be killed."

"Surprise, surprise!" I murmured. "Well, break down and tell me about it."

"Mr. Hathaway is now paying twenty-five thousand dollars a month in blackmail. He wishes to cease paying it."

"I don't blame him," I said, wondering if anywhere in the world there was twenty-five thousand dollars. Things hadn't been so good with me lately. "Well, why doesn't he stop paying it? Why pay me five grand a month for something you can do for nothing?"

Erl Gorley glanced at Hathaway, who was still inhaling that cigarette.

"Unfortunately, at one time Mr. Hathaway was—ah—a trifle indiscreet. If the nature of his indiscretion should become known, he might—well, it would be unfortunate. He prefers to handle the matter privately."

This did not astonish me. I've been around some. Most of us have a page somewhere in the book we'd rather not read aloud before a judge and jury. Especially the big shots in Hollywood, whose box office is so sensitive to public opinion.

I tried to remember what I had heard about this Hathaway. He had popped up in movietown three years ago, completely unknown as an actor. Zarbish, the director, had happened to spot him at the Brown Derby. You know the way Zarbish rides his hunches. That same afternoon Hathaway had a screen test and at eight o'clock had been signed up for the supporting lead in *Heat Wave*.

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Well, the lad had something. And you know what happened after that. It could only happen in Hollywood.

He knocked the gals out of their seats in theatres from Bermuda to Zanzibar and his pay went up to astronomical proportions. The publicity department of Mammoth Features manufactured a glamorous past for him. You've read it in the fan magazines. But the lads who stand on the corner of Hollywood and Vine looking them over as they go by said he came up out of the gutter and still had a lot of the dirt hanging onto him. I'd forgotten some of the stories I had heard that were supposed to come straight from the horse's mouth. That's the best way to do in Hollywood, anyway—forget the dirt you hear about everybody and hope they'll forget the dirt they hear about you.

They were watching me, Hathaway and Gorley. What they saw on my face seemed to reassure them.

Gorley said: "In the morning I am releasing a story that Mr. Hathaway is suffering from a nervous breakdown and is withdrawing from his announced part in *Hearts Aflame*. Secretly, then, Mr. Hathaway is going to the South Seas—to an island he has leased there under an assumed name. And you will double for him in his absence."

I got up. "Well," I said, coldly, "I've had a most interesting hour. Now I'm going back to the Knickerbocker bar. I think your flywheel is cracked."

"Wait, Jerry!" Hathaway begged from his chair. "It isn't as ridiculous as it sounds. I'm—I'm afraid to stay here in Hollywood, but my contract with the studio forces me to. It is subject to cancellation if I leave the state of California."

"Remember that time he ran out on a picture?" Erl Gorley said, smoothly. "They put that clause in then. I've been trying for a month to get him a leave of absence and a year's vacation. They want him to submit to a physical examination and then, if they find he's sick, they'll send him to a sanitarium."

"Well, why not?" I asked.

"The blackmailers," Hathaway said, covering his eyes with his hand. "They'd find me. If I stopped paying them, they'd kill me."

"So you want them to kill me instead," I said.

This Gorley was smart. He gave me a look and said, "If anyone has to be killed, Mr. Hathaway would prefer it to be you than he."

I GOT a bounce out of that. After all, I was a stunt man, a professional double, to save the big shots from breaking their fool necks. And this was the best-paying stunt job I'd ever been offered. The only difference between this and the ones I did whenever I could get the jobs was that no pictures would be made of it—and I would be fooling more people. It didn't matter to me what Hathaway had on his conscience, nor was I shocked at the idea of his slipping the double-cross to his studio. My mind, trained in appraising danger, slid instantly to the danger in this case.

"I don't get any police protection from the blackmailers, eh?"

"No," said Gorley. "But you'll be supposed to be having a nervous breakdown. You don't even have to go out of this house."

"And suppose I'm caught passing myself off for Hathaway?" I asked next. "What happens then?"

"Nothing, so far as you are concerned. If anybody is ruined by it, it will be Mr. Hathaway. I shall be here at first, of course, to help you do your act. And at the beginning of the under-

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taking you will be given a contract absolving you from any blame for errors you may make in Mr. Hathaway's behalf. In the off chance you get yourself into a jam, it will clear you of any civil or criminal responsibility."

"All I have to do is to be a sitting bird, waiting for somebody to pot me, eh?"

"Something like that," Erl Gorley said.

And then, for the first time, I caught a whiff of something that made my memory slide back through the years to a time when I was on the beach, jobless and hungry, in Malasia. You could smell that odor whenever you passed certain native shacks on the waterfront. Hashish!

I stared at Hathaway and at the smoke which he was inhaling from that cigarette, and at the expression on his face, and at the oddly relaxed position of his body. Now I had it! He was smoking a marijuana cigarette!

It takes a lot to bump me, but that did. Oh, I knew that plenty of the boys and girls in Hollywood took hop. And I knew that marijuana—known in the East as hashish—was one of the easiest of all narcotics to get, since it could be grown in almost any backyard. But somehow to see this man, idolized by tens of millions of picture fans throughout the world, hitting the stuff, made my stomach turn over.

"Well," said Hathaway, irritably, "what's the matter? Don't you dare take the job?"

That made me sore. For this same turkey who was now doubting my courage, I had crashed two planes—and in the picture you would have sworn he sat in the splintering cockpits. For this same so-and-so who was dragging dope down into his lungs I had changed from a motor car to a train at eighty miles an hour. Why, that sweet-smelling louse would have called Guy Hendrix or me to take it for him if his leading lady was due to smack him on the snoot in a love scene!

"Listen, toots," I snapped at him, "would your being on the hop have anything to do with talking out of turn? For two bits I'd bust you one!"

All the color drained out of his face. His eyes, which had been blue, turned black and seemed to be all pupil, like a fancy photographic lens. He bent forward quickly, came half out of his chair.

Marijuana does funny things. They say a rabbit, after a couple of reefers, would turn around and chase a hunting dog back home. So I don't know what this Hathaway onion would have done—or, rather, tried to do—had it not been for the startling interruptions that occurred just at that moment. They occurred so simultaneously that they fairly lifted my back hair.

THE window by the grand piano splintered and fell in with a crash. One at a time five heavy bullets whined across the room at an angle, hit on the marble-tiled floor and riccocheted up into the cypress panelling of the opposite wall. And between the fourth and fifth bullet a rock about the size of a baseball bounced in through the broken window, rolled whitely across the marble squares and came slowly to a stop.

All the tightness oozed out of Hathaway's muscles. He fell back into his chair, a fear-blighted bundle of flesh and bone. He clapped trembling hands over his eyes and rocked back and forth, murmuring:

"I knew it I knew it I knew it," in a ceaseless monotone that was a terrible thing to hear.

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Erl Gorley stood motionless, his slender body bent slightly forward at the waist, his white head swiveling slowly as his icy gaze followed the final movements of that rolling stone.

One more shot, the fifth, skittered slanting upward from the floor. Then silence, broken only by my footfalls as I leaped for that broken window. But there was nothing to see there. On the side to my left the windows overlooked a breathtaking view of Hollywood and Los Angeles, all the way to the thin blue glitter of the Pacific, over San Pedro way. But on this side there was only the vertiginous slope of the mountain behind the house, the mountain to whose slopes the house seemed to be tacked like a bug on a wall. I could see up that shale- and boulder-covered slope for four or five hundred feet—an army of men might have crouched behind those boulders and rubble heaps.

"Get three or four guns and a couple of servants," I snapped. "Whoever threw those slugs and that rock are between here and the top of the mountain. Come on, we'll—"

But a tired wave of Hathaway's hand cut me off.

"We'll do exactly nothing," he said in half a voice. "Erl, what does the note say?"

I looked at Gorley. His face inscrutabe he was smoothing out a sheet of paper which had been wrapped around the rock.

"Just what I told you it would say," he answered. "Listen. 'You are two days late on your monthly instalment. Lay it on the line by tomorrow noon—or!' "

I marched over and grabbed the paper out of his hands. It was not in writing, nor even typewriting. The senders knew their stuff better than that. On the cheapest, most nondescript kind of paper, they had pasted letters apparently cut out of one of the daily papers—and impossible to trace.

"Unless you want to call in the law," I said evenly, "I guess you'd better put out the money. What do they mean—'or'?"

"Two things," said Erl Gorley, licking his thin lips. "The first is, they threaten to throw a bottle of nitric acid in Mr. Hathaway's face. Enough, they say, to burn all the flesh off right down to the bone. And after he has recovered from that—if he does—they will expose the little matter of that—ah—indiscretion I mentioned a few minutes ago. Or they'll kill him. They threaten both."

Hathaway shuddered. He pushed himself out of his chair, hurried over to the wall safe and took another marijuana cigarette. Three long inhales of this and he was feeling all right again.

"I've had enough," I said, my voice shaking with disgust. "The air smells in here. I'll be going."

I started for the closed door. But at that moment there was a knock. Rigidity came to the figures of both Hathaway and his secretary. Gorley motioned me to silence with one hand.

"Well?" he said into the stillness.

A professionally calm voice came through the door.

"Miss Maida Watkins, sir, to see Mr. Hathaway."

I swung around to face the two men.

"I won't go just yet," I said, as steadily as I could manage.

CHAPTER II

DEATH, THE CALL-BOY

"FOR Pete's sake," Gorley whispered, "don't let anybody see you here! Get behind that screen."

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I am no eavesdropper, but this whole schemozzle was getting pretty ripe. And the idea of Maida Watkins being in this man's house caused thin trickles of anger to thread through all my veins. I had worked in a couple of Watkins pictures. Once, with a broken collarbone, I had hung around the lot for two hours, just waiting for Watkins to work. And when they had been shooting her big scene I had forgotten my collarbone for another hour, through all the retakes and up to the final shots. And when this Hathaway lug was mooing into her ear, I wanted to lay a Size 10 C boot right where it would do him the most good.

And now Maida Watkins was coming here, of all places. Fair enough. While she was here, I would be, too. Isn't that a laugh? Me, old hard-boiled Jerry Banning, the guy without an illusion in the world, the ten-minute egg who knew all the angles, doing the Sir Galahad stuff! Nuts with that. I was just curious, that's all. I knew in my own mind that every gal in this man's town had her own racket; I just wanted to see what Watkins' was.

Why would she be in this house if she hadn't some kind of a job on?

So I sat down behind that screen, feeling like a low-life, peeking through the crack like a hotel dick, while Maida Watkins made her entrance. No, it was nothing as studied as an entrance. Watkins just came in, that was all. And whenever that gal came into a room, or onto a set, or into a picture on a screen, it seemed as if some special light came with her. And here's a funny thing; in a town where eight out of the first ten girls to climb on a bus are beautiful, Maida Watkins wasn't really beautiful at all. Her nose was a little too short, her very red mouth just a little too wide. Instead of beauty she had—had— Oh, nuts, how would I explain it? If Zarbish, the biggest director of them all, can't explain why just to look at Watkins does something to you, how could I?

"I had to come, Dexter," she said in that extraordinary voice of hers. Remember that voice? Low and throaty. When she sang the blues in *Heat Wave* it seemed as if she were carrying all the troubles in the world on her slim shoulders—remember? "What's this all about?"

Through my crack in the screen I could see that Hathaway was thrown for a loss. I couldn't tell whether Erl Gorley was or not. His face never told you more than he wanted you to know.

"What — what's — " Hathaway echoed vaguely.

Out of her purse Watkins pulled a piece of paper. She handed it to Hathaway.

Aloud he read: "Better team up with a new co-star from now on. Hathaway is through. Ask Bittner, his agent." He turned a white face toward Gorley. "It's written with pasted-on letters—newspaper printing," he said in a hollow voice. "When did you get this, Maida?"

"This noon. The envelope had those printed letters glued on, too. I called the house, here, but you were out. I was down on the boulevard, shopping, so I stopped in to see Bittner. He didn't want to tell me a thing, but he did admit that you hadn't been feeling well lately. And he admitted, when I insisted, that you had talked to him about canceling your part in the next picture. Where does that leave me?"

"That Bittner!" Hathaway grated. "I told him not to say a thing until I had seen my doctor again." He pushed himself out of his chair and walked over to the girl. Uncaring that Gorley's

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inscrutable gaze was fixed upon him, he reached down and took her slim hands in his. It was almost as if I were doing it myself—as if, through a mirror, I were seeing myself walk confidently over and take Maida's hands in mine.

"Sweetheart," he said, "why not take a vacation? You've worked hard. You've made a lot of money for yourself—and for the studio, too."

"What would I do with a vacation?" she said, her sweet young profile uptilted toward his. "I'm not tired. A couple of weeks in New York will be all the vaca—"

"Listen, darling," he said, his voice strong and assured. "Tonight we'll take a plane and fly to Yuma. We'll be married there. Then we'll go away together—to someplace nobody knows—thousands of miles from here!"

REALIZATION suddenly came to me that the man had just finished two marijuana cigarettes. He was floating on it, high as a kite. He had completely forgotten that Gorley and I were in the room. He had forgotten, too, all the elaborate plans he and Gorley had made for my doubling for him. Or, with a racket like that on, did he figure on taking Maida with him? For two cents I'd have come around the corner of that screen and kicked the pants off him. Giving Maida Watkins a sales talk like that while he was all hopped up!

I glanced toward Gorley. He was standing quietly aside, regarding his employer with an expression that was obscurely irritating to me. It was as if he possessed some dark secret and was savoring it in his mind—a secret which he shared with nobody.

But Maida's voice cut through the angry turmoil in my mind. Gently she took her hands away from Hathaway's.

"Dexter," she said, clearly, "sometimes I think I like you more than anybody I ever met. And sometimes I don't like you at all. Sometimes you seem like—well, two persons instead of one. And the one you are right now, I don't especially care for."

"I'm sick, Maida," Hathaway groaned. "Forgive me."

"I think you *are* sick, Dexter," she said, gravely. "I wish you'd let me send my own doctor to have a look at you."

"It isn't necessary, Miss Watkins," said Gorley, quickly. "Dr. Flanders will be here at any minute now. If you like, I'll call you up and tell you what he says."

"Please do," the girl nodded. She turned toward the door. "About making more pictures with you—you know I wouldn't run out on you, Dexter. We've been through too much together. I'll give this letter to Mr. Sheibitz, at the studio, and he'll—"

"Please, Miss Watkins," Gorley interrupted, smoothly. "There are important reasons why you mustn't do that."

A thin line appeared between her high, arched brows. Steadily she looked Gorley up and down.

"Mustn't?" she asked, on a rising note.

"The verb was ill-chosen," Gorley said, instantly apologetic. "But it would be a disaster if that letter became public."

"I'll think it over," she said, coldly, and left the room, taking most of the light along with her.

I came out from behind the screen. I was plenty burned. I walked over to Hathaway. He was sitting in hopeless misery, his elbows on his knees, his face in his hands.

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"Rat!" I said to him. "For two cents I'd kick your teeth in!"

Hathaway did not even look up. The lift he had gotten out of his doped cigarettes had died on him and he was touching bottom.

"You see," said Gorley, quietly, "why something must be done? The effect of marijuana is deadly. Even if it wasn't for the blackmailing letters he'd be completely ruined if he didn't get away!"

"What do you want me to do?" I snapped. "Burst into tears?"

"If you take our proposition," the man went on, urgently, "you'll have excitement and danger. You'll live like a king here, or on his yacht if you prefer. Do what you please, go where you like. And you'll be paid five grand a month for doing it."

This Gorley egg was a smooth salesman. He had a nice line. A tempting line for a mug who had missed a fairish number of meals in the past few years. But—like so many salesmen—he forgot to mention the liabilities along with the assets.

Well, I'm no soothsayer. I'm just a big hard-muscled guy who knew how to take the bumps without breaking too many bones. The idea of a few extortionists trying to pin the bee on me in Hathaway's place didn't bother me much. In my time I've been shoved around in this barroom and that, and out of self-preservation I've learned not to lead with my chin. On the whole the idea of fooling around with blackmailers sounded about as amusing as did the rest of the package Gorley was trying to sell me. At least it was different from anything I had tried before, and that was something.

"Okay," I said at last. "When do we start?"

"Right now," Gorley said.

IT WAS not quite as easy as that. Erl Gorley was at all times a most painstaking man. And when Hathaway was not smoking reefers, he, too, was meticulous in training me for my new part. Perhaps the blackmailers were the cause of that. It appeared they were pushing him hard.

The day following my acceptance of the strangest job any Hollywood stunt man ever had, the three of us, Hathaway, Gorley and myself, slunk out of the mountainside home and in the actor's big Sunbeam roadster, highballed for a shack in the mountains near Lake Arrowhead. At least they called it a shack, for it only had five bedrooms and four baths.

"Did you mail the letter to Jerry's agent?" Hathaway asked.

"Yes," Erl Gorley said. "Jerry told him he was swearing off stunting for a time and was shipping as a deck-hand on a freighter bound for the Orient. We even remembered to tell him to hold all Jerry's mail, as there couldn't be a forwarding address. And we told him to pass the word along to all Jerry's friends."

"Good," said Hathaway.

So that was that. I had played fair with them and cut myself entirely off from the world I had known. It didn't matter, anyway. There are plenty of stunt men and when they get used up, there is always a new supply.

There was a light in the eerie cabin among the big trees. We whirled up the twisting drive, pushed out the clutch and covered the last few feet in silence.

"You'd better keep this handy from now on," said Gorley, handing me a .45 automatic. "The letters, remember?"

I slid the clip out and found it full. The thing was well balanced. I felt it would hit whatever I aimed at.

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"Buy me a shoulder-harness when you get a chance," I said.

There was a car in front of the door. Carefully Gorley inspected it.

"The doctor is here," he said, with relief.

We went in. A doctor was already there, having let himself in, apparently, with a key, for there were no servants in the house. Me, I did not care much for the doctor. His eyes were close together, weasel-looking, and his lips were too thin. His name was Winkler. And he was a plastic surgeon who had made a name for himself around the studios.

He sat Hathaway and me side by side and his little eyes flickered back and forth from one to the other like heat lightning.

"Fatten him up five pounds," he said, looking at me as if I were a specimen in a dog show. "A week for the nose straightening to set. I'll do it in the morning. I have some material for that scar on Banning's chin. A line of hairs off the upper arch of his eyebrows. The rest clipped slightly. We're lucky on the eyes. One black rinse for the hair. On Banning a small mole under the left cheekbone. We'll remove it. Hathaway, have you any blemishes on your body that show in a bathing suit?"

"No."

"Have you, Banning?"

I showed him an old bullet-wound along my left ribs. He frowned at that. There was another scar on my right leg where an old compound fracture had come through.

"Not so good," he said, "but with this new plastic material I guess I can paint them out." He looked at Hathaway. "I can finish here tomorrow afternoon," he said, "and my fee will be ten thousand dollars."

He never got his ten gees. He finished the work, all right, but going down a mountain road on his way back to Hollywood, the steering knuckle broke and his car rocketed off into space. If it had not been for his dental plates and the numbers on his car, identification would have been impossible. And so perished the only man beside we three who knew of the forthcoming masquerade. Queer that I should not have been suspicious of so fortuitous an accident. But a lot of things had to happen before I became suspicious of —everything.

CHAPTER III

LITTLE DROPS OF ACID

TALK about rehearsals for an important scene in the pictures! A cinch, those, compared to what I went through for a week. They drove me until I was practically nuts. Hathaway and I would walk across the floor, with Gorley watching every step, every movement of the hands, every mannerism, and correcting me to the tiniest detail. We would sit down and talk; Gorley would correct the pitch of my voice, my intonation, the way I gestured with my hands. Hathaway had a habit of pulling at the lobe of his left ear while he talked; I had to learn that—and do it! He had a way of dropping his lids while he was thinking. That I had to cultivate, too.

I spent hours practicing forgery. Hathaway's signature, the way he ran his letters together in his writing; these I did until Gorley expressed himself as satisfied. And when that monkey said he was satisfied, he had said a mouthful.

"You'll forgive me, I know," he said with that steely politeness of his, "when I tell you I have opened a special bank

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account in Mr. Hathaway's name against which you are to draw for your general expenses. His major account is in another bank and can only be drawn against by using a secret mark in his signature which only he and I know. But I assure you, there will be plenty of money in the account which will be at your disposal."

So that took care of that. He showed me the checkbook which I was to use. There was ten thousand dollars in that account and more would be added as necessary.

For hours uncounted we three sat alone in that isolated cottage while Hathaway told me about his life—since that day when he had been seen by Zarbish and cast in *Heat Wave.*

"Before that," he said, coldly, "my life won't interest you."

Having fooled around the lots for three years as a stunt man, I knew most everybody in the business, by sight. That helped me in my lessons. Gorley had made out a card index file containing the names of practically every person in Hollywood whom Hathaway knew. He had a folder containing photographs of almost every one of them. How long he had been planning this racket, I couldn't imagine, for the trouble he had gone to was appalling.

With the card index, he and Hathaway went over every name, while I made notes. This one, with a red tab atop the card, was a friend with whom I had gone frequently to dinner, had entertained—and who was, as a result, dangerous. Among a couple of dozen names in this category was Maida Watkins. This name, with a blue tab, was merely an acquaintance; we had lunched together on such and such a date, our mutual interests were so and so. Those with purple tabs were business people; I need not worry about those, for I was to see none, but full details were noted, none the less.

"The nervous breakdown will cover up any little lapses," Gorley said, smoothly. "You won't see anyone on business, of course, and if you make a few mistakes, or fail to recognize anyone you should, the illness will explain everything."

He showed me a sheaf of papers he had driven to the village to get. *Hathaway Breaks Down!* one of them announced. *Great Lover Sequestered from Public!* another said.

The gossip columns were full of it. According to the columnists, the studio officials had gone completely haywire, not being able to get in touch with Hathaway, not being able to find out where he had hidden himself. All plans for his—my?—next picture had been held in abeyance and Maida Watkins was being cast in *Gulf Stream,* the first picture she had made without Hathaway since his skyrocket had soared high in the movie firmament. The only ugly note in the whole thing was this hint in *Hollywood Whispers.* Jean Silcox, in her lead paragraph, said:

"Watch the developments in the Hathaway such-a-bizness. They are gonna be *tsk-tsk!*"

GORLEY'S face went white when he read that, but Hathaway did not care. He was floating in a cloud of marijuana mist. Hitting them more and more often, he was. One afternoon —the third or fourth, I think—I found a supply of them hidden behind a stack of movie fan magazines. I crumpled them into dust and stamped them into the ground outside the house. I hated even to have the smell of them on my palms.

An hour later Hathaway came crashing into my room, his eyes expanded

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and rolling. He had a bad case of the shakes.

"What did you do with my reefers?"

I was studying the card index. I took one look at him and rose to my feet. I got myself set.

"How do you know I did anything with them?" I countered, watching him carefully.

"Somebody did, and Gorley wouldn't!" he shouted wildly. His crazy eyes roved around the room. There was a letter-opener on my small desk. He went after it. "I'll teach you to touch my—" he began. His words were chopped off in an inarticulate scream as his fingers closed around the thin-bladed weapon.

I hadn't spent two years in the Far East without learning what hashish does to a man, so I was ready for him. He came at me with a wild and heedless rush and with an insane strength that had me a little worried. I put a chair before him. He swept it aside with one great slap of his free hand. In another instant he was on me and that knife was coming down in a thinly glittering arc. I ducked, sidestepped, and let him have it, a lifting jolt to the button that almost broke his neck, so hard did it snap his head back. I was ready with my right, but when I saw him pitch limply forward I knew he did not need any more.

"Don't do that again," came a level voice from the doorway.

Gorley was standing there and in his hand, held quite casually at hip level, was a gun! And the muzzle of it was aiming straight at my stomach.

"Listen, sweetheart," I said, "any time this hop-head comes after me, I smack him. And if I happen to break his neck, never a tear will I shed. Why don't you cut off his dope?"

Gorley's cold eyes slanted down at the actor, who was just beginning to twitch.

"I'm hired," he said, softly, "to be his secretary, not his male nurse. He has reminded me of that, often."

"Well," I said, contemptuously, "so far as I'm concerned he can stay hopped up all the rest of his life, but he'd better let me alone, and you'd better not get in the habit of pointing that cannon at me—or."

"Or what?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

I began to worry about Gorley's eyes. They were bad eyes.

"Or," I said, very slowly and deliberately. "That's all. Just, or."

And with that I pushed right by him and marched into the living room. My back felt a little funny, facing him unprotected that way, but this was as good a time as ever to see where I stood. Nothing happened. I sat down in a living-room chair and began to wish I were back on the lot, where you could look at danger squarely, and weigh it and measure it, and take what steps you could to keep your own skin as whole as possible. But I was in this thing. And five grand a month was heavy money. And besides, I was getting sort of curious to see what living as Dexter Hathaway could feel like.

IT FELT pretty good. For a while, that was, before they began to move in on me. Did you ever dream you were another man, a millionaire, perhaps, and could have practically anything you wanted just by asking for it? Well, that was me, who have missed plenty of meals in my day.

This Erl Gorley had brains. Three days before my repaired nose—now looking so much like Hathaway's that it gave me a turn every time I looked in the glass—was finally healed, Gorley

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began calling me Mr. Hathaway. To get me used to it, he explained, and to get used to it himself. And for the same reason he began to call Dexter Hathaway Mr. Rogers, a name the actor had chosen for himself, remembering a consultation he had had a couple of years ago with a numerologist. It took me a day or two to learn to answer anytime someone said: "Oh, Mr. Hathaway," but after that it came easily enough.

On a Friday it was that Dexter Hathaway—the original—left the Lake Arrowhead cottage. In his suitcase he had a strip of tickets a yard long entitling Mr. Philip Rogers to first-class passage to Pago Pago. He also had ten thousand dollars in cash. Before he left, he dyed his hair jet black, made three or four expert lines with a make-up pencil which completely changed the expression of his face. He had begun to grow a mustache the first day we had come to the cottage and it had sprouted pretty well by now. You could look at him for ten minutes on end and never suspect he was anything but a small-town business man, or a whistle-stop banker, perhaps, who had made his little pile and was now setting off to the South Seas on the adventure to which he had looked forward for many years.

But just before he left I made him sign a contract. I am no lawyer, but I think it covered everything. Under its terms he employed me at a salary of five thousand dollars a month to resemble him in every possible way; to use his name; to use his power of attorney; to avail myself of his possessions; to "double" for him—all for a period of one year. In return I was to surrender, upon his demand, everything which belonged to him, including his name, power-of-attorney, etc., including any money I might have of his, before the end of the contract period if he should decide to resume his role in life and his own identity. He specifically agreed to relieve me for all liability for misuse of his name or possessions. I was to use my best judgment in furtherance of his interests; that was all.

This we both signed, with Erl Gorley's name on the paper as a witness. I knew it was important to have such a contract; how important it was I never knew until it disappeared!

At three o'clock that Friday afternoon Gorley and a mildly-prosperous, inoffensive-appearing gentleman who called himself Philip Rogers rolled away from the cabin in the big roadster, headed for San Pedro whence the *Lurline* was due to sail the following afternoon for Pago Pago and points east. And the last thing I saw Rogers do as Gorley clicked the gears, was to light one of his cigarettes and to settle back in the seat with a look of benign happiness on his face.

Slowly Gorley's face came around and his eyes met mine. He smiled, but with his lips, not with his face.

I thought about the quality of that smile for quite a while before the purr of the motor died away in the lower distance. There was something about it that bothered me. And suddenly a wave of doubt, uncertainty, flooded over me. I would have given a lot right then to have been able to call that speeding car back and to have told Rogers that this was all wrong and that there was something rotten about it that neither he nor I knew. But it would have sounded foolish. And besides, it was too late. He was gone and I was now Dexter Hathaway for better or worse. And it was up to me to see that it was for the better.

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I HAD five hours to myself before the trouble came and I spent it studying the various cards of Gorley's index and familiarizing myself with my new personality. *The* trouble? That's like saying *the* drop of water in the ocean! But anyway—

My back was toward the door as I sat at the desk. I was so completely engrossed in what I had come to think of as my homework that I did not even notice the breeze which licked my cheek until too late.

And by that time there were three men in that living room.

I felt their presence before I saw them. Slowly I became aware of a tightening of my nerves. They felt as they always felt in the few seconds before I was to bail out of a plane with a 'chute, a few seconds before I was to go over a cliff in what appeared to be a fall but which was, in reality, an exquisitely-planned dive. All my nerve ends began to tingle. The short hairs on the back of my head began to lift. But I wasn't planning any stunt now. So unused was I to the conditions under which I—Dexter Hathaway—lived that I was not even on guard.

So I sat up, suddenly, and looked around. There they were, three of them, and all masked. They stood in a scattered triangle behind me, cutting off my chances of escape through either door or through the window. Because of the masks, because of the obscure attitude of readiness that flowed through their waiting figures, I knew they were enemies.

You can figure your way out of anything—almost—if you have enough time. That I knew because I made my living getting in and out of danger. I didn't need very much time, but I did need some. The only way to get it was to talk.

I remembered to pitch my voice like Hathaway's. "Greetings, gentlemen," I said, slowly pulling my body around, in case talk didn't work. "If I'd known you were dropping in, I'd have had some coffee and sandwiches ready."

"Sit still," one of them said.

He was big. A couple of inches bigger than I am. And I didn't like the part of his face I could see. He had a mean mouth. Small. So small it seemed he hadn't any lips at all. Just a little pink line under the lower edge of his black mask. "Sit still and stow the talk. Where's this month's payment?"

I was honestly surprised. "I thought Gorley paid you after you shot out the window and threw that stone in with the letter wrapped around it."

"He didn't," the big man said, crisply. "Where's the dough? Got it here?"

I remembered that the .45 Gorley had given me was in my bedroom.

"I have some money," I said. "I don't know how much. Wait a minute. I'll see."

I got up out of the chair, holding my breath. The big man took a single step forward.

"I'll do the seeing," he snarled, "while you sit right down again. Where is it?"

He put his hand out to push me back into the chair. Instinctively I leaned forward against the hand. My feet were well placed, so his pushing didn't get him anywhere.

"So you're getting tough, are you?" he gritted.

"No, I'm not getting tough," I said, evenly, "but we'll get along better if you take your hand away."

He dropped his hand and stepped back. His eyes, behind the slits in the mask, were black as coal and as glit-

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teringly hard. They were on me now with a strict and hateful pressure.

"You must be floating high on reefers," he sneered. "Remember when you nearly wore out your knees begging us not to give you a little lesson? Well, we're going to give you that lesson now, where it's so nice and quiet. You can yell all you please. Nobody's going to hear you. And then maybe you'll put out the twenty-five gees the next time it's due. Right on the minute. Pete. Louis. Take him."

TIME had closed in on me with a snap. I didn't know anything about an object lesson, but I knew that if they figured on my yelling, it wasn't going to be pleasant. Three against one. And all three of them tough turkeys. And they were all moving in on me now. The big one put his hand out and grabbed a big fistful of my coat lapel.

Well, when I know I have to go into action, I stop fooling and go right ahead. And there I had the advantage of them. The last thing in the world they expected from the Dexter Hathaway they knew was the thing that happened.

I let the big one have it.

I gave him a left that went wrist-deep into his belly just under his short ribs. His breath exploded out of him in one great grunt. I swung my body to the right and yanked my coat out of his loosening grip. The smallest of the three, a squat, broad-shouldered guy with plenty of muscle, was right in front of me. And the other was closing in fast. I saw all this in the space of a single heart-beat while the big mug was still falling.

I put my head down and tried to buck the line. All I wanted was to get to the bedroom where my gun was. After that everything would be fine. My shoulder caromed off the breast of the little guy and I almost made it—but not quite. His foot shot out like a striking snake and tripped me. I was already starting to move pretty fast and when that foot tripped me, it tripped me right. I managed to loosen up before I struck, but even at that it shook me plenty. I let myself roll once and then tried to come to my feet like a halfback after a fumbled ball. But the little mug threw himself spread-eagled on me.

I put everything I had into an elbow jab and it caught him smack on the nose. I heard him groan, but that was about all I did hear because the second one was now on top of me and the big guy was scrambling toward me on his hands and knees. He got to me just as I was fighting my way to my feet. He put his arms around my knees and jerked. I went down like a falling steeple. My head smacked the floor and knocked me silly for a minute. When the bees stopped humming I was just wriggling like a shimmy-shaker and not getting anywhere. The big monkey was lying across both my legs and the others had an arm apiece.

"Put that gun away, Louis," the big one panted. "What do you want to do—rub out twenty-five grand a month?"

I had wasted enough strength in silly writhing about.

I lay still and let them roll me over on my back. Beneath his black mask the little one was spilling plenty of blood. It was running down under the lower edge and smearing everything.

By the dent on the nose of the mask, it looked as if I had done a fair job on his snoot. I hoped so. I hoped it was around behind his left ear. But his eyes were terrible as they glared down at me. Looking at them I knew he would have liked to have fed me my own liver.

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But he jammed a heavy revolver back in his pocket, so I knew this one was Louis.

I didn't like the way these three worked together. They were too good at it, didn't need enough orders. It looked to me as if they had been places before.

Well, so far as that was concerned, so had I.

"All right," the big one said in a dead-flat voice, "we warned you. You ought to know by this time we aren't fooling. You may think you are working for yourself, Dexter, old kid, but you aren't. You're working for us. And you'll keep right on working for us until the big boy has had enough and until we've all had enough."

I was right back where I started, stalling for time, stalling until a break came.

"Why don't you tell me," I said, "how much will be enough? You've had quite a bundle already."

Was that a wild pitch or not?

It seemed to me Gorley had said they had already paid these birds an installment or two—maybe more—and twenty-five gees a whack. If that poisonous little Louis who had my right arm would loosen up just a fraction of an ounce more, I'd have at least a chance to get my own hand back. But Louis didn't loosen up. He held right on, rubbing the blood off his chin with the shoulder of his coat.

"In a few minutes, Dexter," said the big one, "we'll be turning you loose. Then you get right back to work. This nervous breakdown business is the pear salad. We can't afford to let you have a nervous breakdown. We need the money. Tomorrow, at noon, we'll be waiting for twenty-five gees at the same old place. And now, just to prove we mean what we say, we'll give you a little taste of what we promised. Next time, if you hold back on us, we'll give you the whole dose. Pete, the bottle."

I WONDERED if the original Dexter Hathaway would have known these men. It seemed they had some mutual background, some previous connection, for the big monkey called him —called *me—Dexter*. And spoke, familiarly, of the "big boy." Yet the man wore a mask.

So Hathaway would not have known him well enough to have recognized him by the sound of his voice. There were things to think about when I had the time—if I ever did have the time.

It turned out the middle-sized one was Pete. Obeying the big one's order, he put his knee on my right arm and kept holding on with his left hand. With his right hand he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small bottle with a glass stopper. It contained perhaps an ounce of colorless liquid.

And then, suddenly, my mind traveled back through the hectic events of the past few days. I found myself remembering Gorley's words after we had read the blackmail letter:

"They threaten to throw a bottle of nitric acid in Mr. Hathaway's face. Enough, they say, to burn all the flesh off, right down to the bone."

Nice, eh? This, then, would be the nitric acid.

I pulled all my muscles together for one frantic effort. Then let them go loose. That would be exactly what they expected and they would be all braced for it. So I waited, while my skin crawled in anticipation.

"I can't use both hands, Louis," Pete said, extending the bottle toward the little one who was hanging tightly to my other hand. "Here, take the stopper out. Careful! Hold it by the glass

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knob on top. If any of that stuff touches you, you'll know it."

I watched them while Louis fussed with the stopper. But there was no relaxing of their attention. They worked with one hand only, and hardly took their eyes off me long enough to see what they were doing. They were ready for me to start something, so of course I didn't.

"Not on his face this time," said the leader—the big bird who was sitting on my legs. "That'll be bad for the meal-ticket. About as bad as shooting him. Wait."

With one hand he reached up and hooked his fingers under the loose collar of my shirt. With a powerful downward tug he ripped the shirt all the way down to my belt buckle.

"One drop, to start with," he said, calmly. "Aim it to hit the lower ribs on the right side. As good a place as any, and it won't destroy his picture value."

Louis, very careful with his fingers, took the glass stopper off that ugly bottle in Pete's hand.

I could see fumes rising from the liquid the instant the air hit it. Nitric acid! It would burn through flesh and bone like a white-hot iron; it would burn through metal, even.

I couldn't help myself; I writhed frantically, but pinned down, spread-eagled, as I was, I didn't even budge the three men who were holding me there.

"DON'T like the idea of it, eh, rat?" the bird on my legs sneered. "You would turn against your old partners, would you? Remember your agreement with all of us? That anyone who got into the heavy dough would share with the rest? And you wouldn't even pay Red's lawyers when they were trying to keep him out of the frying-chair? Not until you had, to, I mean. You didn't know your old buddies, did you? Well, listen, our chief reason for not filling you full of lead slugs is we'd rather see you sit in the hot seat yourself. You're a rat, and a coward, and as soon as we've squeezed all the money out of you, you can fry, or hang, or take a sniff of poison gas and we'll never shed a tear. So here's your lesson."

Over the crawling bare flesh of my ribs hung the bottle in Pete's hands. I didn't dare to squirm now. If I did I might tip over the whole bottle. I could almost feel that burning liquid sloshing accidentally over me.

I saw it thicken on the lip of the bottle as Pete slowly, carefully, tilted it. I saw one drop grow on the lip. It seemed to take forever for it to detach itself. But when it started to fall, it fell fast. I felt it hit my skin, just above my lower rib. And then it began to burn its way in, smoking as it worked. And suddenly I knew what hashish-crazed Malayans must feel like when they run amok, driven on by some force greater than they understand. I had seen them trotting straight into the flame of spitting rifles, the steel-jacketed bullets making dotted patterns on their swarthy, sweat-streaked bodies, running on and on long after they should have been dead by every law of medical science. Well, that corrosive drop of nitric acid, burning its way down through the thin layer of flesh covering my ribs, gave me something of the same kind of strength.

My stomach muscles came as tight as the stretched rubber of a sling-shot. They snapped and somehow my legs dragged themselves out from under that big mug who was leader of the outfit.

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And when they started to heave, they heaved all the way.

CHAPTER IV

DEXTER HATHAWAY'S OTHER SELF

MY KNEES, sweeping back and up in that one convulsive jerk, got themselves free of that pinning weight; then went down again like a stone shot out of a catapult. My feet crashed against the shoulder of the man who had, but an instant before, been holding them. And when I say he went away from there, I mean just that. I didn't see him go, but my feet went on traveling long after they had passed the spot where he had been.

But I couldn't get my hands and wrists loose. So I went at it the other way. Throwing myself backward, throwing my legs up and over, I went into a back somersault and maybe that was the one thing in the world those guys didn't expect. Well, so far as that goes, I didn't expect it myself. I didn't give any thought to it. My whole body, trained to instinctive reflexes after years of doing bone-breaking stunts for a living, acted of its own accord without conscious command from my brain.

Over, then, in a desperate backward flip-flop. I pivoted on my shoulders, remembering to tighten up my neck as I began to come down on the other side. I remember striking something hard with my knee on my way up. Then I was on my hands and knees, right-side-up at last, like a sprinter crouching for the gun. And in the infinitesimal fraction of a second that I remained there, getting myself lined up for whatever was to come, I saw something—a still picture, a single frame cut out of a motion picture—and the memory of that single glimpse will be with me to the last breath I draw in this life.

The man Pete was squatting on his haunches. He was staring dumbly at an empty bottle he was holding in his dripping fingers—which were steaming with a thin, wispy smoke. With his left hand he was slowly, stupidly, trying to wipe away drops of colorless smoking liquid which ran down from his mask to his cheeks and chin and dribbled off his jawbone. . . .

Then the picture fades. I can't quite see it. Fortunately. The human mind refuses to accept more than a certain quota of horror.

Suddenly he began to scream. He clawed the black mask off. He looked like a Slav, with dark eyes, a big hook of a nose and bristling black hair brushed in a pompadour. The mask, smoking, fell to the floor. But the nitric acid was at work on the lower half of his face. . . .

He leaped to his feet. So did I. But this Pete had lost all interest in me. He was running around in circles, slapping at his face, trying to wipe his face with his hands. He was looking for a water faucet, maybe. Or perhaps not looking for anything, just trying to run fast enough to leave the pain behind.

But by this time I was running, too. And I knew exactly where I was going. The big guy—the leader—saw me heading past him, bound for the bedroom. He was on his knees, getting up. He hurled his heavy body at me, again trying to bring me down in a flying tackle. Did I say that once, during my checkered career, I had played a season of professional football? Well, if this bird had known that, maybe he wouldn't have tried to tackle me.

"Put acid on me, will you!" I yelled into the screams.

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AND I sidestepped to meet him. My lifting foot caught him right under the jaw. I did my best to punt his whole head out the window. And I gave him plenty. I never waited to see what it did to him.

I dived into my bedroom like a rabbit into its hole. As I raced through the door a bullet smacked heavily into the jamb leaving a whisper of warm wind faintly touching my cheek. So they were going to kill their meal-ticket, were they?

The screams of the man Pete followed me into the room, pushed against me, cut into my ears. A bullet, fired at random, punched through the wooden partition of the room and whined past, slapping against the opposite wall.

The top drawer, left-hand side. I snatched it open. Nothing I ever touched felt any better than that corrugated butt. My whole being was seething with red-hot fury.

A blazing iron seemed to be jabbing at my ribs, where that drop of acid was still eating its way down. But what I wanted was to show them what happened to guys who played with stuff like that—played with *me,* doing it!

I rushed back into the doorway. The big guy was on his feet again, staggering toward the side door as if he were blind drunk. The man Pete was still squalling like a singed cat and slapping at himself as if a million mosquitoes were hitting at him all at once. Louis had grabbed him, was dragging him willy-nilly toward that door.

Through a flame of rage I watched them. I brought up my gun, fully intending to cut them down, one at a time, before they got out of there. And then, slowly, the hardness went out of my gun arm. I let the thing drop back to my side. If they had been coming at me, instead of going away, I'd have been tickled to death to have shot it out with them, and I'd have laughed to see them fall. But somehow it wasn't in me to throw slugs through their unprotected backs.

I cursed myself for a fool. If I let them go now they would come back, sometime, looking for my blood. I could finish the whole thing off right now by letting them have it. I tried, standing there and covering them once again, to key myself up to pulling the trigger. I thought about that drop of acid that was stabbing me like a white-hot knife, and that almost did it. My forefinger actually tightened on the trigger.

But it wasn't any use. I couldn't do it.

So I just stood there like an idiot and watched Louis dragging the still-shrieking Pete, guiding the still-groggy leader, through the path in the woods toward the car.

I saw him push the two of them into the rear compartment and jump behind the wheel. The starter churned and the gears ground in protest. The last thing I saw was the leader's masked face, turning slowly to look at me as the car drove away. The last thing I heard was Pete's thinning shriek dying away among the trees as the car raced down the winding mountain road.

I hurried into the kitchen, ran the faucet water and sloshed cupfuls of it on the deepening burn on my rib. I had been burned before. The time the hot exhaust pipe came back on me during the crash scene in *On Wings of Flame,* for example. But nothing had ever hurt like that single drop of acid, eating, eating. Even after I'd washed the acid away, it was still one bright spot of agony there. The only comfort I had was thinking how much worse off was the man who had done this

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to me. Right now water was helping me. But he wasn't having any water. He was in a car, rushing somewhere, and the acid—purchased to use on me!—was working busily. Well, more power to it!

I FOUND a first-aid kit and there was some salve in it for burns. I smeared a gob of it on, but it didn't help much. Even with only one big drop of acid the pain was a small and localized agony. But the burning on my ribs was a small thing compared with the burning of anger in my brain. My whole system craved for revenge. But now I knew that what I wanted was revenge—not against the poor plug-ugly who had actually handled the stuff. He was getting his punishment right now.

What I wanted was to lay my own two hands on the big mug who had been the leader of the three.

I gloated over the thought that some day, if luck stayed with me, I could get my hands around his throat. I looked down at my hands. They were hooked, the fingers as rigid as cast steel, just as if they were feeling for a man's Adam's apple.

But there was something else. What was it he had said about the "big boy"? Was there somebody above him? Was there some conspiracy which had so enmeshed Dexter Hathaway that he was glad to throw away the brightest career in pictures, glad to take refuge in the soul-destroying anesthesia of a narcotic which eventually would turn him into an effigy of a man with the soul of a beast?

And what was it that bird had said about Hathaway promising to share his "heavy dough" with his former partners? Thinking of that, I almost forgot the pain that was eating into my ribs. Was this one quick peek behind the curtain he had drawn over whatever kind of a life it was he had led before he had hit Hollywood, the city of dreams—and of nightmares? Former partners in what? Somehow I got the impression of walking along the crumbling edge of a dizzy precipice over a pit of unthinkable depth. But the impression faded swiftly and I was mad again, brooding about the pain in my ribs.

I had just pasted a small pad of surgical gauze on the burn with surgeon's plaster when I suddenly stiffened. From outside the house came the sound of a motor car purring up the hill. I slipped my jacket on and stuffed the gun in the right hand pocket. I waited. The car came to a stop outside the house. I clamped my hand around the butt of the gun and stood close by the door.

A hail came from outside. "Hey, you in the house!"

It was not a voice I remembered, but there was a cheerful sound to it. With my hand still in my pocket, I opened the door.

"Well?" I called.

"Why, Dexter Hathaway!" the man's voice cried. "What in the world are you doing here?"

My heart sank. Someone who knew the actor and I had to meet him alone without Erl Gorley to prompt me. I heard the car door open and slam shut and a tall, well-dressed man stalked into the refulgence of light from the door. His hand was outstretched in hearty greeting.

On general principles I got myself set before I took my right hand out of my pocket and let him shake it.

"The doctor sent me up here," I said, being very careful to use Hathaway's voice. "I haven't been feeling so well, you know."

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I did not move out of the doorway, blocking it with my big shoulders so he wouldn't—couldn't—come in. Now, as the light shone on his face I remembered having seen his picture in the portfolio and with some effort I recalled his name. Furber, Clifford Furber. But there was no time to remember anything else.

"A car went past my house," he was saying, "and a man in it was screaming. It was coming from this road and so far as I know this is the only house up this way. I thought maybe there was some trouble up here, so I put a shotgun in my car and hurried up."

"There were some drunks fighting down the road just a little way," I said. "I thought one of them was hurt and I went out, but just then they drove away."

He hesitated and looked past me into the room. By his actions I knew he expected to be invited in. But just beyond his range of vision was an upturned chair and on the floor was still the splotch of nitric acid and the drops of that corrosive liquid that had dropped off Pete's face.

"I'd like to ask you in for a highball," I said, wishing I knew whether to call him Cliff or not. "But I promised the doctor I'd not bring a thing up with me and that I'd go to bed every night at nine."

It seemed his manner was a trifle on the stiff side as he immediately turned away from the door.

"Sorry to have bothered you, Dexter," he said. "I'm in the third cottage at the bottom of the mountain—just for a day or two—in case you'd like to drop in. Good night."

And he marched back down the little path, got into his car and followed the twin beams of his headlights down the road. I went into the living room, took a slug of scotch that would have made the Statue of Liberty go into a fan dance, and tried to get to sleep. But that blasted little burn bothered me. It was daybreak before I dozed off into uneasy slumber.

CHAPTER V

THE GIRL CALLED FLORIDA

EARL GORLEY rolled up the mountainside just after nine the next morning, his icy-blue eyes red from lack of sleep. He was all set for a nap until I told him about my little puss-in-the-corner game of the night before.

"We'll pack right now," he said, instantly. "This place isn't safe any more. I thought we had covered our tracks when we rented this place under an assumed name. But they're smart. They'll be back."

"Who will?" I asked. "The guy Pete won't, not until he grows himself a new face. But if we've got to keep out of sight, we might as well shove off. I had another visitor last night."

Earl Gorley's body went still. "Who was it?" he cracked.

"A man whose picture is in the files. Clifford Furber."

Some of the tension went out of Gorley's figure, but there was still a look of anxiety in his eyes.

"I'd just as soon he hadn't come," he confessed, "but I suppose he'd do as little harm as anybody. At least he's a friend. Do you think he had any suspicions?"

"Only that I wasn't too hospitable."

"He'll brood about that. He's one of the few that Mr. Hathaway would see almost any time, day or night, although I've thought lately that he thought Mr. Furber was getting a little too interested in Maida Watkins."

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"Who is this Furber?"

"Oh, he's a wealthy man who makes most of his money backing 'quickies,' one picture at a time. Somebody without even a shoestring wants to make a picture and he'll put up the money and take it back in a big hunk of the profits. He's popular. You see him everywhere. But we'd better get out of here before he comes up again. I'd hate to have him come in and see those." He pointed down to the carpet. There were great holes burned into it by the nitric acid.

"Wait a minute," I snapped. "I want you to tell me what you know about Hathaway. What was he mixed up in?"

"Something pretty bad, I guess," he said. "Just what, though, I don't know. But he insisted on paying twenty-five grand a month to keep them quiet until I persuaded him to take this means of bringing it to a stop."

"Persuaded him to hire me to take the fall for him, you mean?" I said dryly.

"That's right," he said calmly.

"Knowing his affairs as well as you did," I persisted, "you can't even guess what he was up against? How long has this been going on?"

"This is the third month. We've had two blackmail payments. Everything was fine until he came home from the studio one afternoon scared to death. He said an autograph-hunter outside the gates had stopped him for his signature and had slipped a piece of paper into his hands just as he was thanking him. And in it was the first of the blackmail notes. I never saw it because he told me he had burned it up in the car on the way home. So it must have said something about his past he didn't want me to see. The note said to stand by for a telephone call which would give him directions where to put the money. He—he went all to pieces. And the next evening the 'phone call came."

"Why didn't you have it traced?"

"It can't be done as easily as most people think. And besides, Mr. Hathaway wouldn't let me. He wouldn't let me notify the police. So I had to follow the blackmailer's orders. I got twenty-five thousand dollars out of the bank in used bills, none of them larger than tens. I put them in a big suitcase, wrapped the suitcase up in a rubber sheet and took it to a place out in the desert beyond Indio and left it where they said."

"And you didn't plant anybody there to see whether they took it or not?"

"Mr. Hathaway wouldn't hear of it. But they took it, all right, or we'd have heard about it. The next month another demand came. I put the same kind of a suitcase under that same clump of sagebrush in the desert. It would have been possible to have planted a man there, but I think those people would have outsmarted him somehow."

"How long," I asked, switching the subject, "has he been smoking marijuana?"

"Since that first note came. At least that's when I first noticed it. I tried to stop him but he threatened to fire me. The habit got him very quickly—as it's got three or four stars I know about. So when he got panicky about the blackmail notes and wanted to run away, I encouraged the idea, thinking he'd recover if he got far enough away."

"Why didn't he just check out and go? And why didn't you go with him?"

A THIN smile crossed the man's white face. "I'm sure the syndicate would somehow learn of his going, especially if I went with him. And they'd hunt him down and kill him—or destroy his face."

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"One more question. Where does he buy his marijuana?"

"Usually Mr. Hathaway went to the studio in the chauffeur-driven car. Now and then he'd go alone in the roadster. I think that is when he bought it. I hear there are dozens, perhaps scores, of places where you can buy it in Hollywood and Los Angeles. Not long ago they found men selling it to schoolkids."

"Would I like to put my hand on those birds!" I snarled.

Packing, I thought over what I had learned from Gorley and found that I hadn't learned much. He had talked with every outward appearance of frankness, yet when you tried to analyze what he had said, it was like trying to hold a greased snake. You thought you had something, but it had already slipped away.

Going out to the car an hour later I stopped right in the middle of the path. I put my hand on Gorley's arm.

"Look, Gorley," I said, softly. "I wouldn't want to fool you. I didn't go looking for this job and now I have it I'm not too fond of it. But now that Hathaway is gone, I wouldn't want to pull out and leave him holding the bag. And besides, I have a yen to find out just who is throwing this nitric acid around. But if anybody—you, for instance—starts doublecrossing me, I'll pull his arms and legs off and beat him to death with them."

"Why should I doublecross you?"

"Let's not play questions-and-answers," I said, wheeling away toward the car. "I'm just telling you, that's all. If the shoe doesn't fit, don't try to wear it. If it does, start praying right now."

For a moment he stood there, looking at me, and his pupils expanded like those of a cat. His pale face, beneath the white shock of his hair, was absolutely expressionless, yet somehow I gathered the impression that there was flaming emotion bottled up inside him, seething and bubbling, almost ready to explode. I waited to see what would happen. But nothing happened. After a moment he relaxed.

"Shall we go now?" he asked.

We slid down the long mountain curves in silence. At the bottom of the road the cottages began. On the veranda of the third one I could see the tall figure of the man who had called on me last night.

Gorley saw him, too. "Better just stop and say something," he advised, hastily. "Mr. Hathaway wouldn't just hurry past him."

I coasted to a stop. "What do I call him?" I whispered to Gorley as I waved to the man on the porch.

"Cliff," Gorley said out of the side of his mouth.

In the bright daylight the man was nice to look at. Coming down the path he smiled, showing a fine set of very white teeth under a close-clipped mustache. His eyes were hazel and they had a friendly way of looking at you. I found myself liking him.

"Going back to town?" he said, lazily.

"Yes," I said. "Sorry I was so inhospitable last night, but I was feeling kind of seedy."

"Won't you reconsider about the drink? Have one?"

"Thanks, Cliff," I said, grinning as I shifted my gears, "but I've got to watch my step."

"You look as well as I've ever seen you," he rejoined. "The weeks up here have done you a lot of good."

In a couple of minutes I shifted gears and drove away. Gorley, who had been sitting tensely beside me, almost holding his breath, sighed deeply.

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"Who said you couldn't act?"

"Think I got away with it?" I asked.

"Marvelously. If you can get away with it before him, you're all right. He's one of Mr. Hathaway—one of *your* best friends."

THIS Erl Gorley was not one to miss a trick. He had telephoned the Hollywood house from San Pedro and told them to watch for us some time today, and they were ready for us.

"There'll be reporters," he warned me as we snaked up the mountain road toward the house. "Don't forget you're sick. Remember that before the servants. I thought of changing them all, but there would be talk. If you make slips, lay it to the nervous breakdown. That's why we chose that for your particular illness."

He was right. There *were* reporters. A dozen of them were loafing around the gate behind the house. Erl Gorley had relieved me at the wheel. He honked his horn when we were three curves away from the gate and when we got there, the gate was already open. Gorley drove through in low gear, while I sat back in what I hoped was a convincing pose of invalidism. The big roadster made the reporters clear a path, but a couple leaped on the running board as we went through.

"Listen, Mr. Hathaway," one of them said, "is it true you and Maida Watkins have split up?"

"Please," Erl Gorley begged, "can't you see he isn't well?"

"Have you any comment to make on that squib in *Hollywood Whispers?*"

"No comment about anything," I said, trying to sound ill.

But these two clung to the running board even after we had entered the circular drive behind the mansion of a house. One of them put his hand over the door and grabbed at my sleeve. He missed it and his hand banged against the place on my ribs where the acid burn still stung like living flame.

I like newspaper men. They have been good to me. Without them no star can remain a star very long. But I don't like anybody yanking at me, especially when they hit a sore spot. I put my hand flatly against his chest. I didn't mean to push hard. But the reporter flew off that running board as if he had been hit by a shell from the main turrets of a battleship. The other gave me one look and dropped off.

"That's bad," Erl Gorley said, severely. "There'll be rotten publicity about that."

"A tough break on Mr. Rogers of Pago Pago," I snapped.

A bowing flunky in livery opened the big door and bowed us in.

"Mr. Hathaway," he said, anxiously, "Miss Craig is here. I told her you were ill and wouldn't want to see anybody, but she said you'd want to see her. And she came right in. She's been waiting for nearly two hours in the library."

"Oh-oh," Erl Gorley said on two down-sliding notes.

"Miss who?" I demanded.

"Florida Craig," he said.

I REMEMBERED seeing her name in the card index over which I had spent so many hours of study. I knew who she was, of course. You remember her, if you go to the pictures at all. She played the parts of the girls—the bad girls—who only had to cock an eye and all the boys would come running, gladly, no matter who they were leaving at home. If you don't remember Florida Craig, ask your wife; she'll remember. Every wife in the world is afraid her husband will some day lay eyes on a Florida Craig.

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I took hold of Erl Gorley's sleeve and whirled him around.

"If this gal has what amounts to a pass key," I snapped, "why didn't the card index say so?"

For the first time since I had known this dead-pan, he looked really worried.

"She and Mr. Hathaway—she and you—" he stumbled, "had a disagreement. We thought she was out of your life."

"How many more little surprises do I get?" I snarled.

"Not many," he said, his eyes freezing.

There was something about the way he said that that worried me. But there was no time to argue about it now. The flunky was holding the inner door open and there was nothing to do but to go in.

A girl moved out of the library and came along the hall to meet me. Florida Craig. I recognized her instantly, although it had happened that I had never worked on a picture in which she had been cast. She was tall and slim and her hair was as jet black as her wide, almost Oriental, eyes. Her lips were a vivid red slash against the smooth, olive curve of her cheeks. As different from Maida Watkins as is day from night, she was infinitely more beautiful, yet less—what shall I say? I can't put it into words, but you could see at once that in this slender, sleek, sophisticated creature, there was a smoldering flame that was like the almost invisible glow of a spark at the end of a fuse connected with a dynamite train. It might remain alive, almost unnoticed, for an indefinite time. And suddenly, with the swiftness of fate, it might burst into a white-hot flame that would race frantically toward an explosion which would blow to bits anyone near it.

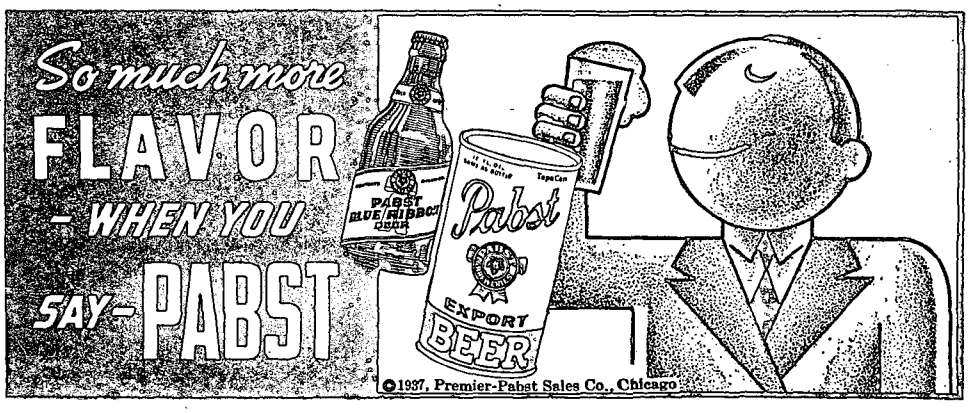
That was the impression I had always had of Florida Craig in her pictures. And now, seeing her coming rapidly, gracefully, toward me, I knew that first impression had been correct.

"Dexter!" she cried.

And came straight into my arms. Her hands felt their way around my neck, ran tantalizingly up the back of my head and tilted it forward. There was no time to think—even if I had wanted to think. Her bright lips came up to meet mine fully, lingeringly, and with an unrestrained violence as dizzying as a thousand-foot spin in a falling plane.

For perhaps a second or two I tried to push her away. After that I didn't care. My conscience—if any—took wing and flew to some far place where it didn't bother me any more.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK



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Death Is a Far Country

By BARY BORU

This is a tale of the sinister lure of the East in a white man's veins, gripping him, carrying him relentlessly toward his doom. It is also one of the strangest stories we have ever read

I am a brother of dragons
. . . Job, xxx 29

Prelude

"ONLY once before had a sight hit me as that one did," said the District Officer; "I mean to say, left my mind benumbed, quite floored for the moment by a sort of mental solar-plexus blow."

It was a strange tangent the talk had taken as the upshot of a casual afternoon on the links. But this was also perhaps the strangest nineteenth hole any foursome had ever finished at, with the players sitting soberly grouped about a great plinth of basalt from which upreared a giant King Cobra poised to strike. They went on with their talk in quiet unconcern for they were seated in the Vishnu temple dedicated to Serpent Worship that stands on the golf course at Simla; and King Cobra, though a god, remained mercifully immobile, for he was likewise carved of basalt.

The foursome had been sent scuttling for shelter in the temple when their game was drowned out by one of those swift seasonal storms of the uplands of India's summer capital. The lofty gloom of the place put a quick damper on the usual round of lie-swapping whimsies of the links.

Such chatter was as unthinkable here as smart-cracking in a cathedral. And for much the same reason. Something more than mortal was in the air, a haunting inkling of other-worlds darkly mysterious. At least it had the effect of subduing a set of ordinarily garrulous golfers. Sitting there mutely twiddling their thumbs they reminded him, the D. O. dryly observed to his companions, of a Tibetan coolie twirling his prayer-wheels—curiously similar defense mechanisms to propitiate the unknown.

Unknown be damned! and the same to all the sundry of its benighted gods, they chuckled in reply—a bit of a hollow chuckle.

Which prompted their host to relate to these newcomers to India an experience out of his own. It would help wile away their marooned hour if it did not shock them somewhat out of their easy conceit—the conceit of the West, still in its teens as centuries go, laughing off the hoary riddle of the East, of unnumbered centuries back to the beginnings of man.

The mounting storm rocked the temple bell in a panicky tolling and whined about the tomblike dome with a touch of monsoon madness while the towering King Cobra seemed astir beneath the play of the lightning's shadows. It was ominous of India at its worst.

"THE first time I was stumped in this odd way was, as it chanced, off on the other side of the world," the

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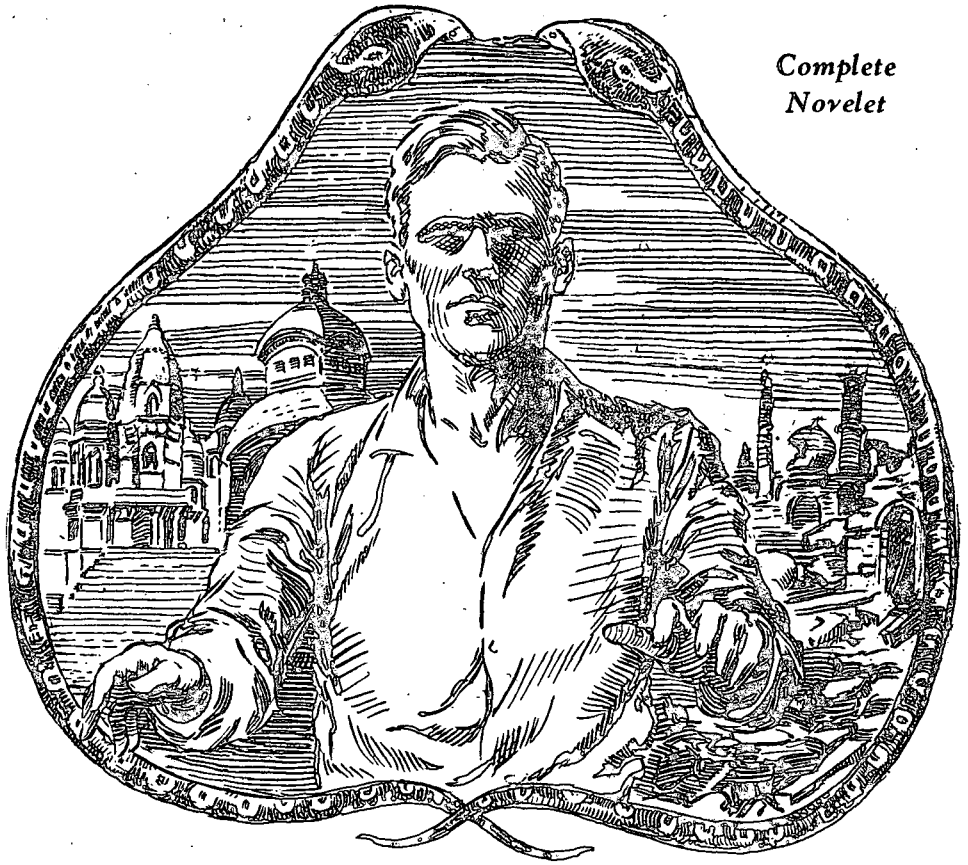
Complete Novelet



D. O. was saying by way of prolog. "In California, one night at the bottom of a deep canyon of the Sierra Madres when I looked up through this immense natural shadow-box and had my first sight of Halley's Comet. It was uncanny. But that's not the word. Nor does awe-struck convey it. It was a sudden stunned sense of coming face to face with unearthly forces beyond our ken, outside our grasp.

"So it was with this girl—my first sight of her, that is, taken together with the setting. I had been out of India long enough, I admit, to be wide open for it. Our P. & O. steamer was headed hard for Bombay and the old spell of the land of the lotus was closing in on me like the fog when I saw her, alone on deck, the Southern Cross filling the night behind her. I stood there staring, and looking silly enough, as I suppose it appeared.

"It was not the sky-show that halted me, for after all that is a commonplace of down-under; but the two taken together, this stunning creature radiant in the reflected light of that sparkling marvel pulsing in the heavens—it left me with the same baffling feeling I'd had that night in the California mountains, of having a rather disconcerting vis-a-vis with uncommon forces, unfathomed powers.

"Looking back on it I can understand the way it was. Much as the white cliffs of Dover meant England to me, the Southern Cross stood for

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India. I suppose the sight of it started a kind of nostalgia for what we call the grand old Mother of mankind, the rather mixed emotions of one returning to her embrace, never being certain whether her heart was of Lilith spawning demons or of Eve rearing a race; more likely, something of both. And in such a mood I walk squarely in upon this revelation, of her standing there at the foot of this sign in the heavens, a living Lilith or was it Eve?

"I kept staring, I know, at this girl there before me having the look of Lilith and the loveliness of Eve. That may sound like a flight of fancy. But they were images as real to me as any we envisage out of the past; perhaps more so, for I used to think of one or the other as the very embodiment of the deep evil of the jungle and the sublime reaches above the snowline.

"You see, India affected me that intimately—like a woman, or a witch! Other fields of my service—Canada, South Africa, Australia—remain prosaic matters of geography and government, strictly impersonal; with Egypt perhaps escaping that dull category as the romantic scene of the queen of vampires. Cleopatra is only a legend now of an ancient lover. India is a Presence. Imminent, inescapable. Its breath always close upon one, whether foul with septic swamp or sweet with the air of the hills. It wraps itself about you—everlasting arms—a phantom thing—lifting you to the heights or dragging you down—"

THE wailing of the storm made his quiet words hardly audible as his glance went nervously to the overshadowing effigy of the King Cobra. "Down—down into the bottomless pit!" With lowered eyes as if the recollection were too terrible he breathed rather than uttered "God 've mercy on him."

"But this girl—" one of his listeners pressed, after a discreet silence.

"Yes, this girl," from another of the foursome, fearful they would be denied any further revelation as too personal for the speaker.

"Oh yes, of course," resumed the D. O., quickly covering his lapse; "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I was anticipating—Well, this girl appeared, as I was saying, as if these twin images of mine had suddenly taken flesh. I could never have sketched nor attempted a description of their features, had never noted any likeness either living or portrayed that suggested any, yet she filled out completely, and it seemed most naturally, the abstractions I'd been carrying around in my mind's-eye. The look was Lilith's, the loveliness Eve's.

"She wore a dark tweed travel suit with beret to match and was comfortably though not unbecomingly shod in true English fashion; but with the first glance I could see she was assuredly not English. Her hair, a rich auburn and in wavy abundance, offered no clue, for it is the one color common to all races. Her clear brown skin was equally ambiguous in these days of universal sun-tan. Her features were pure Caucasian, so far as could be seen, her nose straight and pleasingly prominent, her head nicely proportioned, her height rather above average and figure slender except that she was full-breasted. Her age? The East has a word for it: lovelyhood.

"I could not type her. Not English or European or Hindu or any of the congeries of tribes and tongues that abounds in India. Indeed under the shimmering heavenly lights she seemed hardly earth-bound.

"The skyline of Bombay now show-

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ing attracted her notice where I had failed. She moved past me, her eyes fixed ahead, as if to hurry her passage through the Gateway and, as she brushed close, I saw that look of Lilith —malign, venomous—and heard in syllables strangely half understood what could be only a malediction of deepest damnation, that carried death in it.

"These things I have given you at the beginning because she must become the main interpreter of what follows—as she was for me, and much more besides. . . ."

I

*THE landing of the solitary girl at Bombay is also solitary, except for a black cat she carries in her arms; and she hurries through the motley street throngs to the temple-like railway station. Hurries, that is, save for a significant pause to watch the *pukka* street fakirs with their well known feats of growing mango trees before one's eyes; making a rope or even a boy on a ladder disappear in mid-air; and most uncanny of all, the *sappa wallahs* squatting within a few inches of their deadly cobras which rear and sway in rhythmic response to the Indian flutes. The cat at sight of the cobras sets up a great fuss, spitting vigorously and trying to escape.

When the girl offers the address on a letter to indicate her destination, the ticket-seller expresses surprise that some advance arrangements had not been made through the addressee, Sir John Stafford, for an escort on her hazardous journey to the wild recesses of the Punjab. When the grim young lady suggests that she can probably get a horse to take her there if the railway won't, the ticket sale is promptly effected and she boards the fast Frontier Mail.

Word of the mystery girl's coming creates a one-day sensation at the ramshackle buildings of the Stafford Rock Salt Mining Corporation, Ltd., when Sir John's native bearer announces the report he has gotten over the mystifying natives' "grapevine".

"You'll quit talking that sort of eyewash if you want to 'scape a slanging!" Sir John explodes. Then curiously: "Besides, how do you know all this?"

To which the servant makes only the typical natives' evasion, "God knows"; persisting, however, as he bows himself out with grand salaams that it is true; it is "in the air."

Sir John turns from puzzling over this baffling natural radio to puzzle over the questions as to who the woman could be and what could she possibly be wanting in that God-forsaken spot where no white woman had ever set foot. "India is altogether a puzzling country," he observes philosophically with his stock phrase for all such perplexities.

As his father's namesake and heir Sir John Stafford patriotically carried on for the Crown and profitably for himself in this rock-salt mining concession in northernmost India. He was a blunt hunting-squire type of honest-hearted Britisher, turned fifty; in strong contrast to the second son Harry, a philandering vagabond, at this time off on his amorous adventurings somewhere in England.

The third surviving member of the

* "'When you can tell me where superstition ceases and the supernatural begins, I will define superstition to you', saith the Brahmin."
This was the D. O.'s reply to the query as to how much of the superstitious might have entered into this running account, made up in part of hearsay from the other characters concerned.
The District Officer of the Indian Civil Service, it may be said, fulfills a confidential and paternal office similar to the traditional role of the Canadian Mountie, in the remote districts particularly combining both the judicial and executive functions as well as any others for which he is qualified—in this case, the medical part played by the D. O., who for the purposes of this narrative shall be known as Major (Dr.) Mac.

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family was the youngest son, Paul, who returned to India as to a refuge after the World War. As a young medico in the thick of the shambles, he had come out of it shattered in body if not in mind—the past a nightmare of killing, the future bereft of faith or ambition in anything. He turned from this chaos of the West to the peace of the East, from Mars to Nirvana—to India, where he was born; which he had known as a boy as the land where to kill no living thing was the greatest virtue, the *Ahimsa*.

AT THE bungalow where the brothers keep bachelors' hall on the "next-door side" of the sub-Himalayas Paul hears the bearer's word about the girl's coming in silence; but the hapless messenger is held trembling under his stormy-browed stare.

The still-young face was marked like a tragic mask that hid some hell which had not ceased to haunt him; though such a condition would hardly explain the weird power of the spell he seemed to cast upon his servant merely by the glance of his glazed, uncanny eyes.

Paul's resentment of any such intrusion is emphasized as he makes his way down a wild ravine, flanked by fantastic colossal forms carved in the sheer cliffs, to the crumbling ruins of a *stupa*—a towerlike temple of unknown antiquity. (A massive tree older than Christianity had grown out of the top of the pile.)

Furtively the curiously excited man crawls through the matted jungle undergrowth to a boulder, likewise bearing age-worn carvings, which is balanced to the touch of the hand; and swinging it open and closing it behind him, he goes underground.

An ancient arrangement of reflected daylight from the upper temple throws into spectral view the hideous details. It is the typical cave or tunnel of such temples, as high as a man and twice as long; alive with sounds and glimpses of unearthly creatures; scorpions, serpents, giant lizards, enormous toads, blind bats.

Paul has to dodge and pick his way through the evil mass to reach the inner circular chamber, about twenty feet in diameter, which instead of the crumbling earthen walls is fitted with walls and ceiling of highly polished marble.

The marble surfaces have kept out the reptilian brood and the shadow of Paul remains motionless in the center until a vibrant rustling is heard, with growing intensity; then sharp sneeze-like hisses. He tilts a movable slab to deflect the dim light until the rays fall upon the repellently grotesque head and multi-armed torso of one of the Vishnu gods given over to Serpent Worship; the mammoth figure sitting, as customary, in a carved coil of serpents, when momentarily the most monstrous of the lot moves with life, among its carved replicas; and the light falls full upon the gleaming diamond-like head, black as jet, to reveal the most dangerous of all wild living creatures, the King Cobra, or rather, in this case, the Queen Cobra; with golden spangles speckling each side like earring pendants; the magnificent if terrible body unwinding slowly onto the carpeted floor a length of eighteen feet of shimmering sable, which is now seen to be confined within a glass fence.

In the manner of the *sappa wallahs* Paul chants the incantation:

Bifadl, Bismalla we bi 'lla
Aksamtu alek ya dabia. . . .

A tremor runs along it and the ample folds of the ophidian beauty's wide hood or mantel dilate and palpitate.

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"Don't be angry with me, my Queen, if I seem to slight you today," he addresses her, almost fondly. "I've had disturbing news, and your serenade will have to wait—till some necessary tasks are attended to."

HE LIGHTS an oil lamp, disclosing a portion of the chamber fitted out as a modern laboratory. He puts on some milk to heat over a Bunsen burner and busies himself with the preliminaries to an experiment.

The reptilian type of the specimens and equipment indicates researches of an antivenin character, for a specific serum for the fatal bites of snakes. Charts and graphs show figures of more than twenty thousand deaths in India annually from such cause.

The milk being warmed to just the right touch, Paul slips the bowl under a front glass-panel, lifting like a gate.

"To the Queen's dinner!" he says, mock-heroically; "for after all there is something royal in your power of instant death, my Saprani! It was the same power that made great kings of old; and when they lost it they lost their thrones. The thing that fascinates, in outlaws and desperadoes.

"Only one thing excites the imagination of men even more than this power that destroys life; and that is the mastery, the defeat of the power of death; 'in nothing do men approach so nearly to the gods', as the old Roman remarked!"

And with a sweep of his hand he refers to his experiments and turns back to them. "My own calling," he goes on with grim humor as he works, "possesses neither of these qualities—that is, as it is generally practiced; neither the devilish or the divine. For although, no doubt, a physician may often be fatal to his patient, that is not his ostensible business. And as for defeating death, the patching and mending of worn-out bodies can hardly be called that; only a useless postponement of it. Patched people do not make good ancestors; our brave Norse forefathers saw to that when they set their old and disabled in the front line of battle, for a quick, glorious riddance. If I had my choice of a future incarnation I should choose to be a Central African despot—or a King Cobra!"

He turns impatiently from his work, again to contemplate the giant serpent. "Men are stupid! They know only how to conquer by destroying. They would kill you, my lovely Saprani—even as you, being only a serpent, thought to destroy me!"

He slips back the broad leather band of his wristwatch and regards intently the cicatrix of a snake bite—the two telltale scars of a giant viper's fangs marking his wrist.

Again carefully concealing the brand of the serpent under the leather watchband, he speaks with an odd intensity, his eyes unwinking. "But you failed me, my Saprani—or was it failure? Till you touched me, Saprani, I despised myself and my way of life. I was nothing; a physician without a practice; a scientist without a discovery; a man without a love—without even a sense of the brotherhood of man. Flanders and the Marne and Verdun, they had taken even that away from me!" He laughs sardonically.

"But then you touched me, your fangs pierced my very veins! Was it the torch to inflame my being? whether it be lighted in the higher or the nether fire, I care not! I was a pygmy—I have become a Titan!

"Let those men whose gods are machines destroy themselves with their Flanders and their Verduns. Together

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you and I shall find the great secret—the brotherhood of all creation. The ancients lived in peace with you, wisest of creatures; many of this land, indeed, who preserve the ancient truths which we have lost, do still move among your serpent broods unharmed and giving no harm.

"We have blood-ties, Saprani, by that night when the Moon was ringed with the silver crown, when your fangs mingled with my veins! Alien bloods make strange currents when they mingle! It is destined!"

He whirls about as if a little touched by madness and strides across to his test-tubes and plunges deep into his formulae. "If I prove myself great in no other way," he mutters, "I shall prove myself the greatest of fools!"

THE centuries tumble away—from the twentieth to primitive times—past the train-window of the solitary girl as she speeds north from the modern seaport capital; finally to survey, from the deck of a flat-bottomed river boat, nearly-nude tribesmen breaking the soil with plows hewn of trees and pulled by pony buffaloes.

"In the beginning . . ." she muses. For these were identical with the first plows used by man, somewhere in this cradle of the world. It was their quaint triangle shape that suggested in the dawn of time the first written sign, *alpha,* of the earliest alphabet, with which she seemed somehow to be familiar.

On the marshy shores of the great stream that gives the land its name, the Indus, she finds the headquarters of the Stafford salt works.

When she presents her letter to Sir John her easy composure and perhaps the sudden apparition of her peculiar beauty in that unbeauteous place leave him less assured than ever before the opposite sex.

The letter is from his Uncle Ned, in England. It identifies the girl as his daughter—of the odd name, Sinfire; strangely drawn to India, "she wishes no more than I to be a burden to you; only that she may, until she finds her footing, have the shelter of your hospitality."

With a little gust of feeling, the girl dabs at her nose with her kerchief. "It was his last wish," she says.

"My poor child," Sir John responds, almost with paternal affection. Then he holds out his broad hand into which she puts hers. "I am glad that you are—our cousin," he says with a deep-drawn breath.

Answering her surprise, he explains that his father, to whom the letter was addressed, had likewise recently passed away. "Strange that the two brothers who had been so separated in life should be leaving this world almost together."

"But in that case," she starts to say, but Sir John overcomes her qualms with the assurance that he and his brother will deem it a privilege to do what their father would gladly have done.

"Your brother?" Sinfire asks pointedly.

Her interest droops as he explains that it is Paul, who has come to him since the War. "He was pretty hard hit; he's hardly himself yet. Living like a hermit in the hills. That's where a woman comes in. Without her, men left to themselves just naturally drift back into barbarism."

"But there was another brother?" she says.

"Oh, yes. Harry," he replies heartily. "If he were only here now! He's the talented one of the family when it

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comes to—well, entertaining the ladies as should be. But he's off roaming, mostly; in England, from latest reports. Wonder he didn't look up Uncle Ned—that's to say, while your father—or the family, at any rate. There were other children besides? But really it's a little shocking, the way we families too often lose track of each other—what with scattering to far ends of the Empire—"

Sinfire interrupts the other's embarrassed moment with another pointed query: "But this other brother—Harry—he'll be back?"

"Yes, indeed. Perhaps in seven years; maybe in as many days. But Harry always comes back, the scamp; like a bad penny, you know, when they won't have him elsewhere."

THE roar of a motorcycle outside indicates that the native servant (with a sly smile for "Lady Sahib's" arrival according to prediction) has anticipated his master's desire that she should be conveyed by side-car to bachelors' hall.

Sir John adds a postscript to the letter, bespeaking for "Cousin Sinfire" a cordial welcome, and gives the servant the missive for delivery to Paul.

As the side-car whirls off, the servant beaming with its first Lady Sahib passenger, Sir John goes inside, patting one of his coolies abstractedly; at length, to his white assistant, saying abruptly, "Do you think her pretty?"

"Do you, sir?" comes the other's respectful echo.

"I don't know," says Sir John, more to himself; "I've never seen anyone like her."

And standing at the window he follows her departure in the vanishing whirl of dust until it fades into nothingness on the horizon.

After their exciting dash over the narrow hill trails with the puffed up bearer strutting his driving skill for benefit of his most honorable passenger, the side-car is parked at the bottom of the footpath by which they must make their way to the bungalow in its aerie perch on the slope.

Stopping to look at the ruins of the *stupa* near the ravine, Sinfire remarks the faint notes of a flute.

The servant, startled, exclaims: "No Burra Sahib, no white lord's ear can ever hear that *toumril* before, which Hindu ear have heard in the *stupa*. Lady Sahib hears like Hindu *ranee!*"

"The same flute that *sappa wallahs* play for their cobras," remarks Sinfire casually.

But the servant with a gesture to his lips begs silence.

Sunfire advances in the direction of the sound, when he stops her with grave warning: *"Bhut! Bhut!"*

"But no ghost will hurt me," she says unconcernedly.

"Lady Sahib understand Hindustani talk!" he further exclaims. "Born in India maybe?"

She shakes her head.

"Lady Sahib understand Hindustani talk, hear Hindu sounds, but not born in India!" the servant repeats, baffled for once by one as inscrutable as his own kind.

Resuming his way along the footpath, he saves his face by delivering himself of his master's stock phrase covering such situations:

"India altogether puzzling country!"

II

SINFIRE, on her arrival at the bungalow, is entrusted to the care of the servant, Jagwant, Paul's personal bearer dubbed Jaggy, for short.

Jaggy makes it clear that most bad

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for him Hakim (Doctor) Sahib Paul has not yet returned, being unbeliever when his poor servant tells him of Lady Sahib's approach.

Whereupon she is led to the guest room, made ready with little touches worthy of the shrine for a goddess. Her letter, with Sir John's postscript, is placed in Paul's bedroom by Jaggy.

Morning finds Jaggy timorously arousing his master; timorously, because the letter, lying crumpled into a ball on the dresser, is evidence to the sly Asiatic's mind as to what his master's temper will be. He informs Paul that Cousin Lady Sahib has rising up.

"Well, what of it?" grumbles Paul from beneath his covers.

"Will Hakim Sahib have breakfasting with Cousin Lady Sahib?"

"Get the devil out of here!" explodes Paul; "and give Lady Sahib my compliments."

When Jaggy returns Paul is scraping off his days' old beard with vocal discomfort. He blurts out that Cousin Memsahib Red-fire, or whatever that wild name is, be informed that he will breakfast with her at her convenience.

"Cousin Lady Sahib have already having breakfasted," is the servant's response.

"In that event she's no lady!" exclaims Paul with a gratified, "Thank the Lord!"

He hustles through his ablutions, his curiosity now piqued in his hurry almost forgetting the wrist-watch, which he carefully buckles over the serpent's scars.

As Paul enters the living room Sinfire is standing, her back to him, studying the portrait of a young man among the older family faces hanging on the wall.

A polite cough failing to obtain recognition, "I beg your pardon," Paul says from the doorway, "but this, I take it, is Cousin—Cousin—?"

"Sinfire, perhaps," she says; and while provokingly keeping her back to him: "And you—may be—Cousin—?"

"Paul," he says.

While he is studying his next approach, she continues, still absorbed in the portrait: "And this maybe—is—?"

"Harry," he answers. "Brother Harry."

The girl gives the canvas one swift intensive glance and turning abruptly advances directly on Paul, extending her hand.

High-strung and jumpy at best, he is taken off balance by her sudden move, then by the full view of her odd old-gold kind of beauty, heightened now by a gypsylike scarf flowing softly about her superb throat, which is circled with a fine necklace of tiny golden spangles.

He looks, at length, to her feet. "I had almost expected to find spangles about your ankles too," he says.

Then, suddenly realizing, he begins a stumbling apology for the tardiness of his hospitality; when she turns again abruptly to the portrait, remarking abstractedly, "Harry. That's the one who's away just now."

"It's a pity," he answers, "the portrait scarcely does him justice."

"There are some people," she says, "whose portrait is to be preferred to themselves."

"It would need to be a very handsome portrait to make that true of Harry."

"Oh, I mean a portrait can do no harm."

"Has anyone done you any harm—?" Paul blurts out, in quick question. Then, "You'll excuse me. I'm a bit on edge. And you see, I have never met a lady so direct, so forthright."

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"Yes," laughs Sinfire, for the first time. "I fancy I'll never grow into—exactly—a lady."

"My compliments!" exclaims Paul, as he takes both her hands, with a little bow.

"WHERE is she? Where is she?" is Sir John's first question on arriving at the bungalow from the salt works; a question which becomes habitual with him later, as he comes to seek her instant presence with his every arrival.

Jaggy fetches her, trailed by Paul, out to the veranda.

"Ah, Cousin Star-fire!" Sir John exclaims.

"Not *Star*-fire, brother dear," Paul interrupts with mock seriousness. "An even more attractive name—*Sin*-fire!"

"Well, I should say Star-fire is more apt, being associated with something heavenly," responds the elder; then suddenly abashed with the rare boldness of his own speech, he stammers: "I already see I need not ask, Paul, how you like our new cousin."

Paul answers with a quiet intensity: "Why, she's a—a—savior-by-mere-sight!"

"Hmm! Hmm!" Sir John coughs at the intimate trend of the talk. "Come, cousin, let's get out and about. Don't let Paul make a shut-in of you, like himself, mooning around in the gloom and the shadows. I want to show you my hobbies—that can't be matched I daresay in the finest manors back home."

And as he talks Sir John has whisked the girl off, around the side of the house; while Paul stands in the doorway, smiling through tightened lips at this flare of gallantry quite extraordinary for his elder brother. Then stepping to the corner of the veranda, he watches after her as she walks with the grace of that lithe sinewy motion from the hips that's to be found only in the women of the East.

"'As she walked her body undulated like a flame—the flame of life,'" he murmurs, when he hears behind him a sharp spitting—to discover the black cat brought by the girl now backing into the doorway at sight of Paul and arching its back and uttering *"Pffts!"* precisely as it did for the cobras of the street snake-charmers.

Paul unconsciously claps his hand over the place of the snake-scars on his wrist under the watch-band, muttering with a bitter smile, "I can't keep my secret from you, wise little demon."

With a serpentlike lunge he catches the cat and is attracted to the peculiarity of its paws. "Double-toed!" he says darkly; then with sardonic humor, toward the disappearing girl: "Not the sign of the witch, surely?"

The cat squirms and escapes from his arms, and with an epithet flung after it Paul hurries down the veranda steps and off in the direction of the ravine where the *stupa* stands.

"YES, they're my one hobby; the blooded ones, that is," Sir John is saying as he leads Sinfire to the stables. "I keep telling Paul, you know, 'A canter is the cure for every evil,' but the poor boy—"

With that they arrive at the stalls and he steps over quickly and throws open the upper doors; at which the heads of two magnificent white steeds are thrust out.

Sinfire stands transfixed, while her escort remarks: "Aren't they beauties—pure Arabians!"

One of the animals turns in her direction and whinnies, and with a transport of delight she runs to it and

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throws her arms about its neck and holds it nose to nose. "This one—he's mine!" she virtually squeals, hugging it.

"My word, but we're going to get along famously!" exclaims her host, infected with her rapture: "I prided myself as a horse-lover, but, but—you!"

She stands dancing impatiently while he throws open the lower door to admit her into the stall, and she goes quickly over every point of the high-strung animal with all the confidence and skill of an amateur of horseflesh, and again turns to pet its nose affectionately and work little braids into its forelock.

"I say," Sir John chuckles, "but you do have a heart for horses."

Sinfire tosses her head back, with her arms about the neck of the animal and says with high spirit: "A horse—and freedom of air and soil to wander about—and free fire and iron for their smithy!"

"Sounds like gypsy talk!" he interrupts.

"Oh a *mallee* has his land—but a gypsy has his horse—that is his treasure!" she answers.

"And *'mallee,'* that's Hindustani! What sort of child are you?"

For answer she starts leading the horse out of the stall, saying simply, "The saddle," while he shouts to the native groom, "Hi! Sapees!"

"Burra Sahib," the servant fearfully addresses his master, "Hakim Sahib Paul not ride Ghoora long time; Ghoora very wild, maybe."

Sir John looks to Sinfire, who only says quietly, "I am not afraid—of anything living—out of doors."

PAUL in his underground *penetralia* is serving Saprani her bowl of milk. He leans against his work-bench and observes her with a sort of fascination. "She has come, Saprani," he says. She is a queen among women as you are queen of all wild living creatures. Her heart is hidden from me as by a veil, as is yours. She is an angel—or a witch!"

He turns to engage in his experiments; experiences a growing lassitude; clasps the wrist with the snake-scars on it, as if tormented with it; and finally yields to the impulse, gets down the Indian flute and, lifting the front glass-panel, squats before it, intoning the eerie notes of the snake-charmer. As Saprani turns her glittering head towards her master a slow continuous shifting takes place throughout its glistening coils, and the forward part of its body is pushed through the opening and held poised in the air, the head and neck as if proudly upright.

CIRCLING the hill trails, Sinfire and Sir John stop for a view of the *stupa* ruin in the ravine below them. Again she catches the faint sounds of the flute, unheard by her host, while the groom attending them shows the same fearful reluctance as the other servant to advance further, muttering likewise, *"Bhut! Bhut!"*

"Ghosts! Ghosts!" blusters Sir John, quite out of patience. "My dear cousin, let me warn you—if you listen to these Hindus you'll be seeing and hearing ghosts everywhere—in the old rotting temples, the trees, the very air! They claim, you know, there are so many different steps or stages of seeing and hearing (smelling, too, for all I know) between their 'enlightened' senses, if you please, and those of a mere Englishman, or any Occidental. How many are there, Sapees?"

"Bapees!" replies the groom.

"Only twenty-two?" laughs Sinfire.

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Sir John flashes a quick glance at her, both for her understanding of the Hindustani numeral and a certain acceptance of the statement of the native —when their horses suddenly shy and rear.

"The Great One!" exclaims the groom, as an enormous serpent peers out of the sweet *dhut*-grass.

Before his master can strike at it with his sword-cane, the servant has shoo'd it out of danger with an excited *"Hut! Hut! Hut!"*

"There you are!" fumes Sir John. "A cobra—a deadly King Cobra—and he—"

The servant salaams deeply and attempts an explanation.

"I know," his irate master interrupts, "I know all of them: 'Even your enemies are friendly when at a distance.' 'If you kill the Great One there are still so many others.' The fact remains, he's got away scot-free, to search for another victim; for they'll do that, they'll stalk a man, these King Cobras!"

He directs Sinfire's attention to the *stupa* ruin below: "There's their breeding ground. In fact, it was in its day the center of the Serpent Worship of the god Vishnu. On festival days the natives put out saucers of milk for their crawling divinities to regale themselves on! Though there is one idea that may have something to it. *Mar-Ashakh,* it's called, Serpent-Love. The principle, as I see it, has something in common with that of the rabies in the case of being bitten by a dog; except perhaps that it's carried a step further. The human victim, who is bitten by a female serpent and has chanced to survive—as rarely happens, it's true—this victim experiences a regular periodical ferment of the venom in his blood; say, with the changing phases of the moon. At such periods the victims are subject to extreme morbid restlessness, a kind of fever, and mental upset; and a German physician has recorded that they are possessed with a craving to be bitten by the serpent—a cobra, I mean —as the only thing that will allay their torment. A Hindu of the Punjab University cites cases of where this habit has grown, the venom acting like dope, from the need of one or two bites a year to one every month or so, till in the end their moral faculties take on the appetites and traits of these deadly reptiles!"

Sir John shudders and stirs Sinfire out of her horrified fascination of the scene below them. "I'm sorry, my dear. I shouldn't have afflicted you with this —it's too dreadful—but you'll find sooner or later that—that—" and again he is rescued by his philosophical adage. —"that India is a very puzzling country."

"It's stopped now," Sinfire muses, preoccupied, when she no longer hears the sounds of the flute and the trio spurs its horses along the trail.

III

AT THE first opportunity Sinfire seeks to solve the mystery of the ghostly flute. In her search for a clue among the *stupa* ruins she comes upon deserted pools of savage alligators, murderous-looking ancient wells, till with a showing of exceptional woodcraft she traces the course made by Paul through the matted jungle-undergrowth, to discover the swinging boulder, which, as she touches it, swings open to her.

She penetrates the fearsome tunnel to the entrance of the inner chamber, there to encounter one of the strangest experiences ever undergone by human eyes and ears. Paul sits squatting on

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his heels, after the manner of the snake-charmers, playing the soft plaintive serenade of the Oriental flute.

Looming higher than his head appears what seems to be at first sight a mammoth candlestick of lustrous ebony, but as it sways with sinuous grace to the measures of the music, is revealed as the Queen Cobra, now aroused to an intoxication of sensuous delight; the eyes almost incandescent in their unholy glow, the dark membraneous hood expanded and agitated on either side of her delicate, deadly jaws from which the arrowlike tongue strikes fitfully.

Sinfire sinks against the wall, her hand upon her pounding heart, as she contemplates the Satanic scene; its two actors entirely oblivious of her presence.

The notes die away and the flute is lowered as the charmer pronounces the incantation:

Bi izn sheikhi Ahmed er Rifaia
We saad u Din nur u Din
We araba el mudarakin

On the fading words the serpentine beauty sinks nerveless to the Indian carpet; with caressing tones the man soothes her and gently places his hands at a precise spot just back of the head and as she yields herself, obedient and drooping, he lifts her and rests her length over his shoulder, her chilly coils touching his cheek and her head, drowsy yet deadly, hung down upon his forehead.

Sinfire advances into the scene, as if drawn by its power.

Paul hears and slowly turns. The shock of the sight of her rouses him from the spell and he faces her fiercely.

"Yes, you have conquered death!" she says, hardly breathing; and the words puff up his strange conceit.

He cautiously unwinds the somnolent great cobra from his neck and gestures graciously about the chamber with the word to her, "You have the key to all things—even to my innermost secret."

"But such power—" the girl starts to say, and he interrupts with that morbid pride: "I can delegate the power," he says, "Saprani is the friend of all who are friends to me."

"Is she my friend?" the girl asks in a low voice.

"That is known to you better than to me," he says.

She throws back her silken shawl and stretches her hand out and lays it unhesitatingly upon the serpent's folds as it lies in its master's arms.

AT THE touch a strong quiver runs through Saprani as a woman might shudder at contact of something she feared or hated, her black neck rises and draws back to launch itself at Sinfire's bosom. But the expert hand of the charmer merely exerts a pressure at that vital spot just behind the head and the fatal stroke is thwarted. The next moment Saprani was in her cage and the screen of glass had slid into place.

"You were not touched?" Paul asks the girl quickly.

"No; but in that moment I made a long journey over the 'black waters', to and fro. Death is a far country—to be so near! Well, Saprani—as you call her—does not like our friendship."

"I will not ask you to forgive her. If there is anyone to blame it is me, who foolishly exposed you to such danger."

"Danger is life," flashes Sinfire, eyes kindling; "and jealousy, that too. Saprani is jealous of her master."

"She has shown that I am not her master."

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"Perhaps she sees danger in me, danger for her master. Serpents are wise—mysterious."

"There is one more mysterious than Saprani," says Paul.

"A serpent?" Sinfire parries.

"It is you—whatever you are," he answers impetuously, taking her hands swiftly in his; "you are no blood cousin of mine. You pick up the speech of this old land and sense the hidden things that only natives know. Your ancestors were of the Old East—" He pauses to consider; then came the clear thought. "Those same ancestors who spread from India twenty, thirty, maybe forty centuries ago—to wander over the face of the earth—and keep their speech pure, like their blood, the only true Aryan! Sinfire, you are a gypsy!"

As he finished he felt the pulse leap in her wrists; and she sensed his discovery. "You are a magician," she says, lightly and noncommittal; "I do tell fortunes."

"You are a gypsy," he repeats, "a true Romany rye! Now I wish I knew them as my brother does; he lived among them for a time."

"He has lived among them?" she fences, leading him on; "he never told me so. And I thought," she adds, with a touch of seeming irony, "that he had told me everything."

Paul feels a flush of pity for Sir John. The elder brother had evidently been making vain suit for the elusive Sinfire. He answers quickly, to catch her unaware. "We are not speaking of the same person," he says; "I expect him here any time now."

"You expect—him?" she replies, and he detects a sudden stirring in her.

"My brother Harry."

"Oh—yes," she says, haltingly. But her pulses fell and her hands slipped from his clasp.

"We'd better be getting back—before we're missed," he says, leading her out.

A WALL-MAP of the heavens and a finger tracing its constellations, to pause on Serpens, then move slowly to the moon. . . . Paul, in his room at the bungalow, checking up the Moon's phases with almanac tables, calendar data; marking the findings with disturbing forebodings.

He seems battling with some downdrag and clasps fitfully at his tormenting wrist, at the snake-scars. He starts out, when the rich notes of her voice drift in; Sinfire singing, in some alien tongue strangely half understood:

Ay-y- . . . . Na janav ko dad m'ro as,
Niko mallen mange as,
Miro gule dai merdyas,
Pirani me pregelyas. . . .

After the first surprise, he finds comfort in it; and eagerly he goes out, following the direction of her song down to the brook.

He discovers her sitting silently, her eyes moist with a tear. He says gently, "You are sad—what was it?"

Impersonally she sings:

I've known no father since my birth,
I have no friend alive on earth;
My mother's dead this many a day,
The girl I loved has gone her way. . . .

"Tell me, you must tell me," he says, stooping toward her.

She leaps lightly to her feet, dodging under his outstretched arms and goes into the *frishka* movement of the gypsy dance; provocative, sensuous, with fiery passion; singing as she dances:

Free is the bird in the air,
And the fish where the river flows;
Free is the deer in the forest,
And the gypsy wherever she goes,
Hurrah!
And the gypsy wherever she goes.

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"You little witch!" he exclaims as she whirls about and throws herself into his arms: "you'll give me heart failure with your mad moods—"

"Beware the mad moods of a—"

"—of a Romany *chai!*" Paul interjects. " 'Of one whose blood has rolled through gypsies ever since the flood.' "

There is conviction in his voice.

He takes her face firmly between his hands and scans it. "There's no drop of Stafford blood there," he says. "And the bird-peaked eyes, peaked at the corners—there's mischief there, for someone. Tell me," after a moment, "what thing sent you to this end of the world?"

"Stealing a horse," she banters.

He addresses her seriously: "Come now, how did you get here? Why did you come?"

She answers seriously, with a nod in the direction of the *stupa* ruin in the ravine: "The Romany *chai* can keep a secret—yours—as well as her own."

With a word she has disarmed him; and bound him to silence concerning herself.

He sinks back into his morbid mood as his thought goes to that other thing. "Can you like me—since—?" he says, referring to the scene of their meeting in the cobra's chamber.

"I don't dislike you," she answers, in a tone that conveys much more; then with smoldering feeling: "I dislike no one. There is only one, and him I don't dislike, I hate!"

"Who is he?"

"Some day," she abruptly closes the discussion, "you will know—maybe." And she turns away.

As they move back toward the house she absently hums the first haunting air, touched with sorrow as she pronounces the line: "—the girl I loved has gone her way—"

HIS "thunder-and-lightning girl," as Paul has come to call Sinfire, brightens the darkness of his spirit with happy spells, until for the first time he dons his riding togs with her and together they race each other to the stables.

Sinfire is greeted by the excited neighing of Paul's horse; but as he approaches, the animal shies and lunges as it did for the King Cobra on the trail.

Paul hesitates, sensing the cause of its disturbance; then tries to quiet it for a mount, but without success.

While Sinfire goes for her mount he quits the stables unnerved, sick with despair: "It seems all creation knows it—all except stupid man," he says, hopeless; and he places a soothing hand on his burning wrist.

When Sinfire rides out with the groom she finds Paul making it down the ravine toward the *stupa* ruin with mad strides.

Dismissing the groom with her horse, she heads Paul off; finding him racked with some fearful inner torment; some mounting unnamed passion that seeks surcease only in the secret chamber below.

"Please, dear heart, please leave me, just for a little while," he asks of her, "and I will soon come back to you my old self."

Her elemental nature blazes forth; flings itself into fierce conflict with the evil thing rising in his veins; whips, cajoles and gradually leads Paul away from the ravine, down to the scene of their rendezvous at the brook.

With a swift impulse he sweeps her off her feet. "Devils and vipers hate water," he says sardonically and carries her across the stream.

He throws himself down, exhausted from his experience. At length, he says:

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"You still—still—don't dislike me?"

She rests his head in her lap, stroking it. "*Aficionado,*" she says from her heart.

He presses his lips to her hand.

"It is our best word," she says. "It is for him who has not the *Kaloratt*—our 'black blood'—but who has the true Romany soul."

He looks up to her with all love; then the haunting fear of that other thing prompts him to speak. "Oh help me, help me, my sweet, to escape this life—this halfway house to Hell!"

She is undergoing some crisis of the heart. The race instinct of the gypsy strain within her battles with her overwhelming love for him—the love for which his heart calls almost with a death-cry—and she places her right hand in his.

"It is good fortune," she says simply.

He looks at her, not understanding.

"You have carried me over the waters, *Aficionado,*" she goes on. "I give you my right hand. By the Romany law we two are now one!"

He searches her eyes, hardly believing. "You mean, my precious, you give all your heart to me—forever!"

A tear stands in her eye: "*Ava,*" she affirms, and drops her head shyly. "When you take me to your tent, *Aficionado!*"

AS PAUL and Sinfire separate at the bungalow to go to their respective rooms he holds her and whispers: "Tomorrow—tomorrow I shall take you, my sweet."

They kiss.

"Together we shall take the Romany road!" he says.

"And freedom of air, and soil to wander about!" she joins, with ardor.

"And free souls—tomorrow," he adds; and they part.

"Tomorrow!" he muses in his room, in the gathering darkness. "What a gulf night is, between one day and another! Sometimes it may mean the difference between this life and another. The night that separates the maiden from the woman, the wife from the mother, innocence from guilt—"

A shaft of the evening's early moonlight edges in from the window. He hurries over to look up at the moon now hazy with an enveloping mist.

Alarmed he consults his almanacs and charts. He is bitterly plagued by the offending wrist. He turns back to the window to behold—the silver Crown that rings the moon! A dreadful look, a stony look of horror and despair: "Oh God!" he utters, "it's come—it's come!" and falls upon his face.

Presently when he lifts his head a frightful change has come over his countenance. The nose is pinched, the eyes sunken and unwinking, the temples drawn hollow, the ears retracted, the whole color livid, the lips pendent and relaxed; every feature twisted to give the shocking effect of the reptile as he stares with the glazed "look of the viper!"

Flitting his tongue fitfully, he half crawls, half clambers to the door, and out.

He races headlong down the ravine, in through the entrance tunnel to the cobra chamber.

He lights the oil lamp, dashes over to the Indian flute, as if he feared a failure of his strength, and breaks it over his knee.

"Who is master now?" he cries out in full frenzy at the excited serpent. "Queen of Vampires, Daughter of Hell!" he exclaims as he tosses the broken pieces against the glass panel. "For the last time our bloods have

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mingled! Go find another victim, from which the very vultures turn away."

Enraged seemingly with hate the aroused monster rears and strikes again and again at him, behind the glass, while two streams of the deadly venom filter down harmlessly.

Stealthily the hardly human figure winds his way back from the *stupa* ruin to the bungalow, slithering up the veranda steps.

Inside he hesitates, flicking his tongue ominously. He starts for Sinfire's room, when a challenging *"Pfft! Pfft!"* is heard and the black cat backs up against the door, body arched and claws unsheathed for the defense of its mistress. He curses it under his breath, or is it a sharp sneezelike hiss? Swift as a whiplash he has seized the animal, while momentarily out of the darkness comes the cat's death-cry. When his face is again thrust back into the light two telltale red flecks show conspicuously upon its sudden pallor, red flecks about the mouth. His body and spirit have been utterly drained by the mad storm of his terrible affliction and he is barely able to get back to his own room, where he collapses.

PAUL is in an evident coma when discovered next morning. In this out of the way place the only available medical help, as it happens, lies in the person of the District Officer.

It is the tradition of the Indian Civil Service, particularly in the remote "non-regulation territories," that any special qualifications of its officers are at the disposal of the District; and in this way Major Dr. Mac, the local District Officer, is summoned.

Sir John ushers Major Mac in to Paul.

As the former retires, the physician swiftly sets about checking on what were his immediate suspicions that here at last might be one of those cases of which he had heard among native authorities but had never personally verified; the malady of *Mar-Ashkh*, so-called—the dread visitation, Serpent-Love.

He gives Paul a hypo and rouses him from his stupor.

With the passing of the paroxysm the more extreme effects suggesting a reptilian metamorphosis of some kind have practically vanished; but the patient is plainly in an utterly debilitated state as from some long fever.

Before Major Mac can address him directly with his questioning, Paul pleads piteously with him to keep his secret; swearing he will break off this terrible liaison with "her", with "Saprani"; did so in fact last night; it was "their anniversary," when the silver Crown ringed the moon, as upon that first night when her fangs pierced his veins!

The physician finds Paul's body branded again and again with the blue pits of what might as well be serpent bites as the hypo marks of the dope addict. In either event, "I'm afraid it's too late, my friend," he says.

"I'll quit this land of serpents," Paul avows; "go where I couldn't satisfy that craving even if I wanted to. I'll go tomorrow!"

The Major goes out of the room.

"Tomorrow!" Paul repeats and as the thoughts of his promise of last night return, of his happy word to Sinfire, he buries his head in his pillow, with heartbreak.

Major Mac disguises the uncertainty of his diagnosis to Sir John. "It's one of those strange fevers peculiar to the Indian jungle," he says. But he finds himself prescribing the treatment followed by native physicians for *Mar-*

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Ashakh. "It's a desperate fight," he goes on, "a fight to be won by 'temperatures,' if at all."

The elder brother is hard hit. But about this matter of temperatures?

"I mean to say," responds the other, "under no circumstances must he be allowed to get 'hot-blooded'—whether from temperatures without or from disturbances or emotional upset from within. Any such ferment may well be, well—fatal. Fatal—or worse!"

"Or worse?" queries Sir John puzzled.

But his question is interrupted by an outcry from Sinfire, who enters carrying what was Blackie, the cat.

The physician announces there are some appearances of death from a cobra attack; and yet—

"I found her by my door, as if protecting me from the horrible creature," Sinfire says distressed.

"A cobra—in the house!" remarks Sir John. "That doesn't happen often."

"No! No!" Jaggy insists, "No cobra in the house. Not one!"

Major Mac looks pointedly from the cat toward Paul's room, but with a shudder as if trying to avoid the thought; he says:

"No, that doesn't happen—often," he says, as he takes his leave.

"OUR tomorrow . . . it's a long time coming," says Paul to Sinfire, who has devotedly watched over his convalescence, now progressed to the invalid chair stage.

Sinfire hums a gypsy *gilli*:

Give me happiness today,
And I shall laugh at care and sorrow;
Bring me joy this very hour!
Who has ever seen tomorrow?

"Are you happy?" Paul says; but it is not a question.

Her words are warm with love: "*Me kamava tute,*" she says. Then: "You understand?"

"Love is a pretty handy interpreter," he smiles; "it has made me understand" —and his face is crossed with afflicted memories—"many things."

Momentarily, there's a hearty "Halloo! Halloo!" from below; and Paul exclaims eagerly, "It's Harry—Harry!"

Sinfire covers her startled hearing of the name. But not before Paul's quick glance has caught it.

"You'll probably want to talk together," she says, leaving; and Paul's protesting noes fail to detain her.

Vague suspicions return to plague him over her apparent avoidance of Harry, together with her earlier unusual concern about him. He wheels himself out from the room, in his invalid-chair. But the meeting between the two has already taken place and he has lost this opportunity, at least, to discover what the possible relations between Sinfire and Harry might be.

Sinfire, in fact, has by now retired to her room.

"She's always so thoughtful—so much tact," Sir John says to Paul. "She fancied we could talk more freely with Harry; though really I look upon her as quite a member of the family, apart from her being our cousin."

Harry is as handsome as his portrait. Or better—attractive, winning. For his features are less noticed than his long rangy figure, and his easy bearing, physical and mental, is of marked appeal. The kind of chap who, whatever his years and whatever the occasion, wouldn't look out of place in Eton cap and blazer. In age, of the indeterminate forties.

An arresting trio, the brothers. There's conflict in their very types. Harry, blond and daring, the Nordic.

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Paul, by turns gay and darkly dramatic, the Norman. Sir John, rugged, ruddy and hirsute, of the Picts and Scots. A British mixture.

Harry is quite shocked at Paul's pathetic condition. He covers it with a hearty brotherly handclasp and twits him: "You're sure this is not a malady of—the heart?" he says, with a nod in the direction of Sinfire's room. "Love unrequited, you know—" and finishes with a characteristic lusty peal of laughter.

Finding the pair a little ill at ease Harry follows up his advantage. "Of course, you and Jack are both in love with her," he addresses Paul and not Sir John.

"Of course," replies Paul in seeming banter, and craftily studying Harry for his reaction, "—but perhaps her heart was touched before she came here."

"When I settle down I should like to marry a girl like her," the other answers with disarming freedom; "but fancy old Uncle Ned having such a beauty in the family!"

"You saw him while you were in England, I hope, before he—" Sir John suggests.

"No. He managed to shuffle off this mortal coil before I caught up with him, drat the luck!" Harry says, again with a significant glance off towards Sinfire. "He was something of a bird of passage himself, you know. But—well, there were other circumstances; it might have been awkward. Things sometimes get—well, that's to say, 'entanglements sometimes prevent,' diplomatically speaking."

HARRY moves from the veranda to the door and takes a look around the living room, turning to address the others still outside: "You know, when I am actually here, I envy you all the comforts of a home. But I couldn't stick it. I'm no glue-pot—but then you both know that."

"No. More like a gypsy, I should say," Sir John says.

"Quite!" laughs Harry. "There's no constancy about them; that is, as to places. But they're constant to each other—to their sweethearts and wives; that's where the gypsies and I part company."

Harry turns his back on them to view the room again and not seeing him as she passes through with some changes for Paul's room Sinfire pauses before Harry's portrait to breathe the malediction, *"Mandy 'll pen leste a wafedo dukkerin!"*

Harry hears with a start the gypsy jibe and his selfassured smile gives way to a forbidding scowl.

He watches the unsuspecting girl keenly while Sir John remarks from the outside: "Aren't you afraid that this playing with fire—playing around, as you put it—will get you into a bad scrape some day?"

Harry laughs and says, observing Sinfire closely as she starts on again, "A gypsy girl once told me that I bore a charmed life"; on which Sinfire hesitates, then quickly recovering herself, continues along. His voice rises, for her to hear, as he turns back to his brothers saying, "No one that I have ever harmed can ever harm me, that was the prophecy. And as you see, so far it has turned out to be true," he finishes with a laugh.

Sinfire, inside Paul's door, has held it ajar to hear the last of the remark, and she repeats under her breath the threatening words, *"Mandy 'll pen leste a wafedo dukkerin!"* The door closes on her face, with the very look of death in it.

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HARRY means to take Sinfire for himself—even if he has to use the apparent secret of her true character as his weapon.

Her ill will he dismisses as arising from his untimely appearance on the scene; which in some way might interfere with her little scheme or schemes. What these may be he hasn't the least idea. He had never seen the girl nor she him, apparently, before their meeting here.

He sustains gracefully the role of a man anxious to make himself agreeable to a pretty girl, a lovely "cousin," of new acquaintance.

Evidently for purposes of her own she responds in kind—until the favorable moment, when he opens up his offensive.

" 'When the fruit is ripe the bird arrives,' " he says to her.

"—or the hawk!" she flashes back.

"Splendid!" he exclaims, thrilled at her fire. " 'The hawk rakes down upon the rabbit!' "

"And finds the rabbit has fangs maybe," she retorts.

Casting aside further byplay he seizes her abruptly. "You little impostor," he flings at her. "Who are you—and what's your game here?

"Bird-peaked eyes!" his breath whispers upon hers; "the smile of the serpent, walk of the panther, devilish beauty—and the gypsy's curse! A gypsy of 'blackest blood'!"

She breaks out of his arms and unlooses a wild bantering tirade: "I'll tell you the truth! I do tell fortunes! I keep a tent to take stolen goods! I help to make counterfeit money and all kinds of forgeries! I deal with thieves! I lie, swear, cheat and steal and get drunk on Sundays! And I do many other things! I am a real Romany witch!"

"Bravo! Bravo!" cries out Harry. And swiftly he takes her and presses a kiss on her lips—when heavy steps are heard on the veranda, and she slips off to her room.

Sir John comes pounding into the living room and Harry, unconscious of his brother's humor, remarks: "Jack, you're more like a horse than a man; when I hear your step I always forget you are not a quadruped—"

"You are a thief and a scoundrel!" exclaims the older man, trying to control himself.

"That is bad enough for so noble an animal as the horse," returns Harry, quizzically, "but I withdraw the expression. It is a sufficient excuse and explanation of your proceedings that you are Sir John Stafford, Baronet, of Sappa Wallah, Punjab."

The other, heedless of the sarcasm, flares up: "You can't play with me," he shouts. "This is my house. I don't want you here!"

Paul, who has heard the uproar, wheels himself out from his room and watches silently, unnoticed by the other two.

"Do you think I'll let you insult ladies who are my guests?" Sir John rages on. "No, by the gods! I saw you in here—saw you with her in your arms; saw you take that kiss!"

A horrible look comes upon Paul's face.

"If she hadn't been there I'd have come in and knocked you down on the spot, you—you infernal rake!" Sir John exclaims.

At this Harry throws back his head and laughs out: "I begin to understand," he says. "But you're mistaken in one thing, Jack. If she hadn't been there you wouldn't have knocked me down."

The other regards him with a nonplussed expression.

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"Because," Harry goes on, looking the other quietly in the eye, "if she hadn't been there you would have seen no cause to be—jealous."

Paul, with some terrible malevolence concealing the fearful fury with which he had realized his brother's act, wheels himself in between the two men just as Sir John is set to spring at Harry, who has not moved a muscle.

Paul manages to restrain the former long enough for his aroused passion to subside; then to Harry, quietly, with death-like composure, he says: "If you have anything to say I wish you'd say it."

"Why, Jack," Harry says at once, addressing the older brother with perfect geniality, "I wouldn't have annoyed you for the world. I had no idea you were seriously interested in—our cousin," and he stressed the word. "I took a cousinly privilege with Sinfire, that is all. I'm sure she considered it nothing more. But if you like I'll ask her pardon in your presence."

The older man at length haltingly says with touching simplicity that he probably would have been less angry if he had better hope of persuading Sinfire to listen to his proposals, but that he had about made up his mind that she would never accept him.

"I'm sorry if I acted like a brute, Harry," he concludes; and the two brothers presently go off amicably to smoke a pipe down at the stables.

Paul wheels himself back into his own room, like one in a trance.

Sinfire hurries to Paul's room, and he lifts up at her with a muffled cry of rage. But she grips his hands and repeats, "I hate him! Hate him!"

Her emotions overcome her. "Oh, how helpless I am," she exclaims brokenly, passionately. "I meant to *'Sovahallas me pa o chone!'* "

make him pay—pay to the full the Romany oath I swore by the moon:

"What oath? What for?" he interrupts savagely.

She draws from her bosom a tiny chain carrying an oval emerald ring.

"Why—why that's an old ring of Harry's!" exclaims Paul.

"Yes. With this he betrayed her," she utters.

"Her—who?"

"Didimani!"

"Didimani?"

"Yes. That was her name. 'Sister-jewel'," she says, with anguished memory. "My eldest sister. The treasure of all our tribe. I loved her. It was at the fair—or the races—or somewhere away from us, away from her people's tents, she met him. And she gave him all, all love. And he gave her—this!" she says with hot hate.

Her words are confused but her meaning is clear. "When he did not come back, she had to confess—it was that way. And when a Romany *chai* confesses herself *chambri* by a *Giorgio,* a Green Gentile, she is *bitchedey pawded,* what you call, banished. Buried alive, we say—buried, away from the tribe, from the tents of her people. And soon she was truly buried—buried with a broken heart."

She drops her head, weeping silently. When she lifts it, revenge—grim, unwavering—has replaced sorrow. "The Romany heart has a long memory," she says, "and vengeance is sure. From a letter I got hold of I forged his uncle's name, Uncle Ned, and came here, across the 'black waters,' to wait for the hawk, for his homecoming—But he is your brother—your brother! Oh, why did I ever see you!"

"I have no brother in him, Sinfire," he says bitterly.

She withdraws her hand and presses

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her burning eyes. "I did not know I could come here after—after what you heard," she goes on; "but you seem to understand—I don't know how—"

"Because I know him—and love you," Paul says.

"I have waited, waited for you to be able to go away with me," she hurries on; "hoping, praying that we might be away before he came. And even after he came I was ready to turn my back on my oath, break the Romany law. But now he means to have his way—that was why he did not tell Sir John today what he knew, that I am a Romany. He means to keep me in his hold by that secret. He means to have me, regardless."

Weakness overcomes Paul. And she attends him.

V

MAJOR MAC on his return call finds Paul in a highly feverish condition, which he ascribes to the trying hot spell that ushers in the monsoon time. In fact, when he is about to take his departure Sir John points out the rising storm signs and prevails upon him to stop over rather than risk being caught on the road by the death-dealing hurricane at its height.

The deepening night is filled with the disturbed cries of wild parrots and peacocks and the haunt-you-birds, as Jaggy the servant calls the owls.

All the circuslike fauna of the Punjab race down from the torrential rains that have broken over the mountains, seeking to escape through the foothill jungles into the great central plateau below—leopard, panther, jungle cat, wolves, striped hyenas, bears, wild hog, bison, wild dogs in packs that give no tongue.

The wind's fury sways the old *stupa's* tower till its long-silent bell sets up a doleful tolling—terrifying Jaggy into superstitious fear. "Bad, bad, bad!" he chatters, eyes popping; "somebody in this house have bring down heavy god's anger. *I* have not done!"

As the rills and rivulets swell to torrents from the cloudburst all manner of crawling things, driven from underground by the waters, join the stampede.

A shrill neighing of a horse is heard; then an awful scream, as if its death-cry!

Sir John and Major Mac dash out for the stables, Jaggy carrying their guns.

They find a wide gap in the fence of the compound, blown out by the wind.

Dragged from the stables almost over to the gap in the fence, lies the body of one of the white Arabian horses; its neck snapped in two, a quick examination shows, by what must be the mightiest of jaws.

Jaggy has leaped to scan the pugs—the muddy molds of the great paws—that circle the spot, to shout fearfully, *"Rimau Kramat! Rimau Kramat!!"*

"The Ghost Tiger!" echoes the Major, "the king of all man-eaters!"

Jaggy runs to and fro in comical panic, if the moment were not so serious, exclaiming, "The grandfather of all the striped ones"; and as he runs he pantomimes his description, "One leg shorter than the other," as he has been able to discover from the pugs.

"That's the old outlaw, of a certainty!" chimes in Sir John. "He must have accounted for a score of human lives in this District."

Jaggy starts running for the house, shouting, *"Rimau Kramat! Rimau Kramat!"* while Sir John regards his poor Arabian fondly: "It's a price to pay," he muses, "but it's almost worth it for a shot at the old devil."

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"It's the biggest game I've ever had a chance at," chuckles the Major; and the two prepare to stalk their quarry.

At the house Jaggy is retailing the news to Harry in excited jumbled fashion, and the latter exclaims jubilantly, "That's game worth tracking!" and makes for his weapons as Jaggy darts out again with reserve guns for the other two.

Harry pauses; looks upstairs toward Sinfire's room: "More to my fancy," he mutters to himself; replaces his gun and goes up and raps on her door.

No word is said as she opens to him. His look conveys his intent; and he intercepts her as she attempts to slam the door on him.

As he takes her she swings herself around and out the door and down the stairs, crying, "Paul! Oh, Paul!"

In the living room Harry catches her and holds her and presses his lips again and again on hers in a passionate frenzy, smothering her outcries—when the door of Paul's room is flung open; and over the other's shoulder Sinfire glimpses a sight that chills her blood and she utters a scream of horror that unnerves Harry, who releases his hold upon her.

She backs toward the stairs and Harry stands transfixed with amazement more than fear as Paul with a mad bound grapples with him.

THE reptilian metamorphosis or whatever it might be had come upon Paul again in all its hideous aspects; and as he throttles Harry he snaps like a mad dog or rather strikes like a serpent at his wrists.

Sinfire on the stairs covers her eyes to the harrowing scene—hearing only Harry's agonized pleas, "Brother, brother Paul, please—don't. Oh, God! Not that! Not that!"

. . . Until the cries cease. Then only a groan, a long groan of death.

Hearing no further sound Sinfire at length comes down from the stairs, to find Paul gone and Harry apparently beyond all aid.

She drops to her knees beside the body; extracts the oval emerald ring from its chain within her bosom, drops it upon his breast and with a prayer to heaven of an avenging accomplished, says quietly, *"Sovahallas me pa o chone!"*

As her eyes travel vengefully over the body they are arrested by two livid marks upon the wrist—as of a serpent's bite; but as she examines them she sees they are crescent in shape, distinctly the imprint of human teeth, where they have pierced the veins like viper's fangs!

With a ghastly shudder she looks from these tiny telltale stigmata of death to Paul's room; then off to the others somewhere outside; and the awful thought, what if they should discover the sign of this monstrous deed of Paul's!

She goes to Paul's room; peers cautiously through his door and finds him crawled back into bed; utterly spent, in an apparent coma. Bloody flecks show on his lips, on either side, above the canine teeth, and these evidences she carefully wipes off.

She returns to pace the livingroom, tortured with a decision she must make. At length with a frantic resolve she whips Harry's revolver out of its holster, holds it poised for a moment, with full realization of the consequences for herself; then blasts a shot through the point of the telltale marks in the wrist, to destroy the last traces of Paul's awful act. The gun drops from her hand and she falls to the floor in a dead faint.

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THE hurrying pen filling out the death certificate pauses on the line *Cause of Death.* Major Mac, who has been writing in the routine facts in his dual capacity of District Officer and physician in the case, now turns to Sir John, repeating with a question, "Cause of death?"

The two men reflect a moment, gravely, silently. They find unspoken agreement as their glances meet.

"Suicide!" says Sir John in cold tones. "I should say, 'Suicide.' And in view of my personal knowledge of certain previous circumstances between them, I should say it was the only thing she could—that's to say, it's the more respectable thing to put him down for."

"Quite!" responds the Major.

The two men run in to help Sinfire control Paul, who has leaped to the window of his room and curses the storm as it threatens the *stupa* ruin.

The venerable tree that grew from the top of the ancient tower bends low before fierce blasts, when with a lightning flash it is uprooted, and the remaining ruins of the age-old pile tumble in collapse.

Paul slips to his knees at the window and buries his head in his arms with a low cry.

Suddenly the other three watching see the flash of the marauding, man-killing tiger bounding back through the fence-gap, a mighty snarling figure a full dozen feet long.

Sir John and the Major make for their guns to head off its bold return to its quarry.

The subterranean chamber in the meantime caves in with the crash of the *stupa,* to release Saprani from her glass enclosure; and with her hood flaring in swollen rage the Queen Cobra rolls the coils of her giant length swiftly along past the broken pieces of the flute and through the outer tunnel and up the ravine, following Paul's trail like a bloodhound!

Paul and Sinfire from the window catch sight of the oncoming monster as it nimbly courses its way seemingly directly on a line for its master's room.

They stand watching motionless, as if spellbound by the ungodly menace of its onset. Accepting its challenge, Paul lashes out with curses upon it, defies it and would himself charge down on it except for Sinfire's valiant resistance.

Through the gap in the compound, into the yard, beneath the very window where they stand it whirls its wild way —when out of the darkness and into the window's shaft of light the tawny bulk of the mammoth tiger rushes to the kill of this crawling interloper, swipes at it with the notorious sledge-hammer blow of its terrible foreleg, and misses!

Gouging sizeable divots out of the turf as it lurches to a stop, the tiger turns to study this alert enemy much as a dog cautiously considers the situation after having been made to look pretty awkward by some shifty cat.

FROM a respectful distance the two stare at each other, with eyes of death—the colossal eighteen-foot serpent, queen of all the deadly reptile kingdom, pitted against the unchallenged lord of all flesh-eaters, with the tremendous power and weight of his twelve-foot length.

Grace, a fatal kind of grace—this is the compelling feature beyond any other, as she holds her stance, lively though still, her proud hood distended and fluttering like a lithe mannequin flouncing her swirling skirts.

Grace too lines every bone and sinew of her heavy-framed antagonist, grace-

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ful as an Irish setter frozen at point.

For this is no stupid slugging match. With cunning and craft these two and all their breed have earned their standing at the top of their divisions, reptilian and carnivora—and now it was a question of kind.

The tiger feints and lunges. The cobra weaves and feints a strike. The exchange continues, with the tiger steadily narrowing his circle about the cobra.

Ordinarily the two crafty combatants might deem discretion the better part of valor and call it a day. But each has tasted of its quarry—the tiger of the blood of the Arabian and the cobra of the veins of her master—and their blood-lust will not be denied.

Both seem to sense this. Yet they deliberately set themselves for the fatal try. The tiger with a murderous roar drives head-on into the lethal fangs of the mighty serpent.

With an audible crunching the massive jaws of the man-eater crush through the cobra's vertebrae like egg-shell but not before it has received into its own veins the mortal charge of the reptile venom.

The rest is unexciting; slow motion. Death is inevitable for both. Except that they never cease struggling to the very end.

Paul stares with eyes straining at the last expiring flutter of the Queen Cobra; a shudder runs through him that seems to shake his very being, and as he slumps limply down from the window Sinfire half-carries him onto the bed.

The other two and the servant enter from the compound, where they had witnessed the last stages of the death duel.

"Hartshorn! Some hartshorn quick!" the Major calls out to Jaggy as he holds Paul's wrist; and turning to Sir John, "There's hardly any pulse," he says.

AS THE latter goes to hurry the servant, Sinfire's eyes widen at sight of the cicatrix of the serpent bite on the wrist: "See—see how pale they are!" she says softly to the physician.

He says, startled, "You knew—about this?"

She nods. "From the beginning."

"It's quite beyond me," he says, noting eagerly the faded traces of the once-livid marks. "They might be the blue pits of the dope addict; they die out eventually. And yet again the virus in his veins, if there be such a thing, may have died out with the death of—" and he indicates the dead cobra outside —"somewhat as the bones of the lower animals when grafted into man decay and die in their own alloted time."

Paul is muttering, in delirium: "And now—mighty Queen—great experiment—test—serum—my pure veins—your deadly venom. Will serum save? Well, doctor should try his own medicine, ha, ha! . . . If I win, thousands of lives saved. If I lose—well the best o' me died on Flanders fields. There's the moon watching—moon ringed with silver Crown—maybe good omen, eh? All ready . . . there . . . there, the wrist. . . . Strike, Saprani! strike! . . ."

"Something's happened!" hoarsely whispers the physician. "It may be this terrific ordeal has carried his fever to temperatures to purge his veins—much as electro-thermal treatments lately have been used to burn out virus that had resisted everything else!"

The hurried steps of the other two halt his speech and he places a warning finger over his lips.

With the aid of the hartshorn brought in, Paul is revived, looks about

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dazed. "What—what—where?" he mumbles.

"Are you all right, Paul?" Sir John asks anxiously.

"Yes, yes of course," he answers with an effort; "just one of those fool experi—fool stunts of mine. Must 've knocked me for a twister, eh?"

He looks about blankly; then is struck suddenly with the beauty of the girl by his bedside.

"You know—remember Cousin Sinfire," says his brother.

Paul happy but at a loss says, "Welcome, Cousin—Cousin—?"

"Sinfire," she says; and in that word all the realization that their precious past had died in Paul's memory.

"Well, now, this is stupid of me; I must get right—" and with a great effort he lifts himself up only to drop like lead as the physician goes quickly to him.

"Guess I've got a blighty one for certain, eh, Major?" Then in a half-whisper: "See you—see you, cousin dear—for certain—tomorrow. . . ."

And his eyes close, with a long sigh.

Major Mac places his ear on the heart; and at length ruefully shakes his head and puts his hand firmly on Sir John's shoulder, who sways a little. "He's gone, Sir John," he says.

Sinfire drops down by the bedside.

"Tomorrow," she utters, with a cry from the heart.

* * *

IT IS some little time before the storm-bound foursome seated together in the Vishnu temple of Serpent Worship at Simla make any movement or word to shake off the thrall of all these things and find that the fury of the storm has spent itself.

Returning to the links they are about to tee off, when the happy cry of a woman's voice is heard—a long-drawn odd Oriental *"U-lu-u-u!"*

The men turn as one, to discover a young woman pulling up on a white horse, a pure Arabian, drenched from the storm but riding forward in evident high spirits.

"U-lu-u-u!" calls back the D. O. in greeting; then to his companions: "May I interrupt the play for a moment? I want you, I'll be most happy to have you know—my fiancée—"

The others quickly take in the girl, her rich auburn beauty, a certain loveliness—the loveliness and the look of Eve!

"Sinfire!" one blurts out spontaneously, giving voice to the thought of the rest.

"Quite," says the Major.

And they say the English have no sense of humor.

If You Suffer Itching Burning Torture of
CRACKED BLISTERING TOES SORE BURNING FEET
ATHLETE'S FOOT
MAIL POSTAL FOR FREE TRIAL SIZE JAR
NORMAL COMFORTABLE FREE OF DISCOMFORT
MERCIREX
MILFORD DELAWARE
DEPT. A-2
YOUR DRUGGIST STOCKS OR CAN PROMPTLY GET MERCIREX FOR YOU. IF NOT WRITE US.

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A Complete Novelet of One Exciting Night in the Glamorous Malay Melting-Pot

A Street in Singapore

By JOHN K. BUTLER

Author of "Reunion on River Street," etc.

I

BILL BRENNAN leaned across the sooty rail of the *S.S. Malaya* and sleepily watched Chinese coolies labor up and down the gangplanks. The coolies worked in pairs, carrying baskets of cargo slung from sagging poles, and their bodies glistened naked brown under the glare of the Singapore sun. With baskets loaded, they marched down the steep planks to the dock, only to come up again with baskets swinging empty. Like ants on a trail, they toiled in two busy lines, and like ants, no individual had identity in their constant parade of labor.

Along the waterfront, as far away as Brennan could see, work went on

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without end. Bullock carts hauled bundles of rattan, the carts drawn by hump-shouldered snow-white cattle—the kind held sacred in India. Modern motor trucks and tractors raised a bedlam of noise, snorting gasoline smoke into the hot sluggish air.

Brennan removed his pith helmet and mopped his face with a damp handkerchief. In the sky, far off, dark clouds clustered, and Brennan heard a rumble of thunder above the noise on the dock. Pretty soon, he hoped, rain would fall in Singapore.

Brennan wore white ducks, sneakers, a white shirt that was open at the throat and rolled at the sleeves. His arms and chest, like his face, had a deep-stained tan which had come from nearly ten years on the China Sea. He was a young man still, and the Equator hadn't yet sapped his strength.

He turned and looked through pleasantly squinted eyes at the unloading of crated machinery from a forward hatch of the ship. With the rattle and chug of the winch engine, heavy crates were hoisted out of the hold, swung gently through tropical sunlight and set down on the blistering planks of the wharf. Dock foremen shouted orders in several languages, and from the bridge of the *Malaya,* an officer directed the operator of the winch by arm signals. Many of the crates being unloaded were destined for Peninsula tin mines, and Brennan's job was to supervise their delivery.

He fished a stubby pipe from his hip pocket, fingered tobacco into the worn bowl, and as he scratched a match along the rail, a voice behind him said:

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"Hello, Mr. Brennan."

He turned. It was Marsha Lang. He dropped his helmet to the deck, stuffed his loaded pipe back into his pocket.

"Hello, Miss Lang."

SHE looked nice and cool, even in Singapore. She wore a tailored linen suit, and her man's shirt and tie made her appear only the more feminine. A red flower in her lapel had the fresh color of her lips, and her skin was golden tan in contrast to the starched white linen. She was trim and small, but not fragile. She could travel anywhere in the world, Brennan thought, and not be afraid.

"I thought you'd gone ashore by now," he said.

"I did go ashore. But I couldn't find my brother. He was to meet me at the dock, if you remember."

Brennan remembered. He'd met Marsha Lang for the first time aboard the ship when it sailed from Hong Kong. His place had been next to hers at the captain's table, and he got to know her quite well. She was an American girl, but, except for a period of schooling in the United States, she had lived most of her life in the Far East where her father represented an exporting concern.

Most of her conversation had revolved around her brother. Evidently, she had a deep fondness for Jeffrey, a student of Oriental art who spent a great deal of time tracing the source of Chinese painting to the T'ang Dynasty. The names of ancient Chinese masters of art were unfamiliar to Brennan; he'd never heard of *Wu Taotzu,* the greatest of all Chinese painters, nor had he heard of Wang Wei, Han Kan, Chao Mengfu. Naturally he hadn't. Brennan's work in the Far East had been with machinery, with tin mines, with rubber plantations, with coffee and sugar exports. He could converse at length on such subjects, could describe the experience of nearly dying of malaria, of nearly being killed by headhunters in Borneo, of standing off a bunch of Chinese bandits with only a Luger pistol for defense.

But he had enjoyed listening to Marsha Lang. Her voice was pleasantly cultured, and her affection for her brother Jeffrey, her pride in his accomplishments, had been nice to hear.

Jeffrey, so she'd told Brennan, was a painter himself. He had once made a copy of a painting supposed to be an original *Wu Taotzu* and worth a fortune. That is, the original itself had been worth a fortune, a treasure belonging to a wealthy Chinese family in Hong Kong. Jeffrey's copy of the masterpiece proved so fine that he sold it immediately, through his agent, Paul Karwaski, to a collector in Paris. The sale brought a neat sum to Jeffrey and the collector who purchased it made the complimentary comment that only a few dozen students throughout the world could tell the copy from the original.

Marsha Lang rested her hands on the rail of the *S.S. Malaya.* She said something but Brennan didn't catch the words because the winch was making noise again.

"Sorry," he said, and waved a hand toward the racket on the forward part of the deck.

"I'm rather afraid . . . I mean worried," she repeated.

BRENNAN became aware of a certain expression about her eyes, a tightness in her lips, that did betray worry—and fear. She didn't look at him, just watched the Chinese coolies moving up and down the gangways.

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"Your brother?" he asked.

"Yes."

"He'll probably be along. After all, we docked an hour ahead of schedule."

She shook her head a little. "We've been in more than three hours."

"Maybe he was just delayed," Brennan suggested. "It's darned easy to be late for appointments in Singapore."

Again she shook her head, and allowed her eyes to become fixed on the bustle of activity on the wharves beyond the berth of the *S. S. Malaya.* There were dark-skinned laborers of every breed and crossbreed, the bullock carts driven by half-naked Klings, their lithe muscles glinting in the sun, red rags holding their dark hair in place. Chinese coolies worked everywhere, and Malays loafed in the shade of the galvanized-iron shed, watching the work, spitting betel juice. Ships were being loaded and unloaded, ships to and from Bangkok, Sidney, Hong Kong, the Suez Canal, and Europe. Big ships and little ships, great ocean liners and tiny *junks* and *sampans,* small vessels bound for Java, Sumatra, Borneo.

Marsha Lang looked at all this with eyes that didn't see the activity. None of it made any impression on her —she wasn't, really, looking.

Brennan said reassuringly: "You won't have any trouble locating him, Miss Langley. I'll help you, if you want. The British authorities will be glad to assist. Or we can go to the American Consulate. It won't be any trouble. We can find his address—"

"I've *got* his address. That's not what worries me. I have his address right here."

She opened a hand-bag that matched her tailored suit. Her fingers were slimly graceful, and the sunlight made nice reflections on polished nails. She gave Brennan a slip of paper. "This is the address."

Glancing at it, he knew she was watching him closely.

"I'm not familiar with Singapore," she said quietly. "Do you know that address?"

He folded the paper and, handing it back to her, avoided her eyes. "Not exactly. But I think I know the street."

"What kind of a street?"

"Well . . ." Brennan faltered. "It's sort of . . . out-of-the-way."

"What kind of a district is it in?"

"Well . . . of course Singapore is changing. Does your brother live at this address?"

She nodded and pursued: "What kind of a district?"

Brennan got out his pipe, gestured for permission to smoke it. She nodded in a brisk impatient way, watching him put match to the tobacco, waiting for his response.

"It's not a very good district," he admitted.

THE information seemed to give her a sudden sharp hurt. It wasn't, he noted, an unexpected hurt; it was as though she'd known what his answer would be and yet held some last hope that it would be different. He added hastily: "Singapore is changing. The district may be better now. It's been some time since I went through it."

She winced, and then regarded him with frank, unafraid eyes, and her lips attempted a smile. "I asked for the *truth,* Mr. Brennan. Now you're hedging." The smile became challenging. "This district, this street—it's pretty terrible, isn't it?"

"Pretty bad."

"How bad?"

He realized she wouldn't allow him

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to evade. "It's a mixed district." He frowned into the bowl of his pipe. "Chinese, Malays, blacks—not the best of any of them. The police get trouble up there."

"Killings?"

"Well . . . I believe there *was* a case of a Malay going *amok* last year."

"Narcotics?"

"Yes."

"Women, dives . . . ?" Her cheeks colored through their tan and she didn't have to finish. She knew she had guessed.

She leaned elbows on the ship's railing, nervously swung her bag, didn't look at Brennan. Thunder boomed and rumbled over the China Sea; the monsoon would shortly bring its downpour.

"It's the same old story," she said softly, more to herself than to Brennan. "Always the same. I keep thinking it'll change—keep hoping it will. But it doesn't. It won't. Not ever."

Brennan noticed a watery sheen in her eyes, turned away. She touched his arm.

"I rather b r a g g e d about my brother, didn't I?"

Brennan felt uncomfortable in the presence of the emotion she was feeling and trying to stifle. The tears remained in her eyes, trapped by lashes. The line of her jaw was smooth and set almost grimly. Her voice had no sob in it.

"Jeffrey . . . all I ever talk about is Jeffrey. I guess I nearly talked your arm off about him."

Brennan tapped hot ashes from his pipe. "Not at all. I liked hearing about him. Must be a darned swell chap."

"No!" she corrected vehemently.

He felt embarrassed, and concentrated on polishing his pipe between the moist palms of his big hard hands.

"He's *not* a 'darned swell chap'!" she went on. "He's rotten!" Then she appeared abruptly annoyed at herself for saying it, bowed her head, and he couldn't see her face under the brim of her white hat. She spoke without anger, or emotion. "I'm sorry I put it that way. I guess he's rotten all right. But maybe he can't help it. I'm awfully fond of him."

"I'm sure you are," Brennan responded awkwardly.

"All those things I told you about him are true. He's brilliant as a painter. Perhaps he's even a genius. But he's young and he's weak. This has happened before. He goes away and doesn't work. He drinks, and there are women, the cheap kind, any old kind . . . and he uses drugs. I try to keep my father from learning about it; it would break his heart if he knew. He'd blame it on himself; blame himself for raising us in the East."

"Your brother'll probably get over these sprees," Brennan assured her. "These young fellows . . ."

She shook her head in weary resignation. "Not Jeffrey. He doesn't change. He goes away, and then I get a letter from him." She tapped her bag to indicate that such a letter had brought her to Singapore. "He wants me to help him. Always, I find him sick and stranded, in trouble. I've found him that way in Shanghai, in Port Said, in Macao, in Yokohama. On and on. It's always the same story."

"Can I help?" Brennan asked. "I mean, I might go to this address with you?"

The expression of hopelessness left her face, and there was gratitude in its place.

"Would you do that?"

Her eyes searched his.

"Glad to," he said.

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THEN they weren't alone any longer. A man had come along the deck, smiling at Marsha Lang, a tall stout man, dressed immaculately, for the tropics.

"Ah!" he greeted. "Miss Lang! Ah!"

He removed his hat, bowed.

Marsha Lang recognized him with sudden pleasure and relief. "Professor, I'm awfully glad to see you. Is Jeffrey all right?"

The man ran fingers over his dark hair. "Very well. But he was unable to meet the boat. He feels a little . . . indisposed. Ah, it's good to see you, Miss Lang. I regret my delay."

"Is Jeffrey . . . sick?"

The professor coughed politely into his palm. "Not anything serious. Just . . . just a touch of Singapore." His reassuring smile showed strong teeth. To Brennan, the smile lacked sincerity. "Nothing serious," the professor went on, "just the damnable Equator. Ah."

He spoke with a slightly European, slightly English, accent, an accent that was a hodge-podge of all the accents Brennan had encountered up and down the Eastern seas. He eyed Brennan now with forced pleasantry and said: "Ah. My name is Paul Karwaski."

His hand was moistly plump in Brennan's grip.

"I'm sorry," Marsha Lang apologized. "This is Mr. Brennan, professor. He's been very kind to me on shipboard."

"Ah," Karwaski smiled.

"Professor Karwaski," she explained "is a dear friend of Jeffrey. He's been understanding and patient. He represents Jeffrey in the sale of his paintings. I believe I've mentioned him to you."

Brennan nodded and returned Karwaski's smile. He remembered that Marsha Lang had referred to a man who had sold one of her brother's copies of a Chinese masterpiece to some collector in Paris.

She was looking at Karwaski now. "I didn't know you were here, professor. From Jeffrey's letter"—she again indicated her handbag — "I thought he was alone. I've been worried."

"Ah. I came down last week from Shanghai. I've been looking after him. I can assure you he's not badly off. Shall we go to him now?"

"Please." She put her right hand on the arm he extended, offered her left to Brennan. The hand felt small and firm in the short moment Brennan held it. "Thank you very much, Mr. Brennan. I shan't need you now. Sorry to have bothered you."

"No bother." Brennan was reluctant to say goodbye and couldn't find the right words to tell her he hoped he could see her again. "I'll be at Sanford House," he said. "It's the hotel off Raffles Square. I'll be there two days. If there's anything I can do . . ."

"Not a thing." She withdrew her hand from his, thanked him once more with a smile. "Goodbye, Mr. Brennan." She was already moving off on Karwaski's arm.

Brennan strolled along the rail and watched them walk down the passenger gangplank to the dock. There was a ricksha waiting, and Karwaski helped her into the seat, jumped in briskly beside her. The coolie puller was bare-legged, thin, and wore a straw hat shaped like a mushroom. He stepped between the shafts, and set off at a trot, expertly maneuvering through the dock traffic of laborers and bullock carts and tractors.

Once Brennan thought Marsha Lang glanced back to the ship and

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waved to him. He wasn't sure that she'd waved, but he waved back anyhow. There was something lonely and brave about her, he thought. And she was beautiful. And probably he wouldn't ever see her again.

Overhead big clouds were rolling, shutting off the direct glare of tropical sun. Thunder crashed in booming explosions, like cannonfire close at hand. A big drop of rain struck Brennan's face. . . .

II

AFTER an early dinner, Brennan sat on the veranda of Sanford House and, with a highball at his elbow, watched nature's swift change from light to dark. The sky had cleared, but rain water still stood in brown puddles along the street. The evening was warm, and huge electric fans in the ceiling of the veranda turned sluggish blades, swirled away the smoke from Brennan's pipe.

With the fading light. Singapore's harsh glare of daylight gave way to the twinkle and glow of street lamps. Rickshas and automobiles battled an ever-increasing pedestrian traffic. Social life had begun in the cafés, the hotels, the clubs, had begun even in the darker byways.

Brennan thought about Marsha Lang. His mind was full of pictures of her, playing shuffleboard with him on the deck of the *Malaya;* her trim figure; the wind tousling her blond hair; brief laughter. Then at the Captain's dinner table, nicely dressed, her hair arranged to the last lock, the polite reserved way she handled table conversation. Always cool and fresh-looking, as though the tropics bothered everybody else but not her.

He thought about the problem she had with her brother and the way she'd been meeting it—with relentless courage. Going to places in Macao, Port Said; picking Jeffrey out of dives, setting him back on his feet. Always trying to keep her father from knowing that Jeffrey had gone to the dogs.

He thought about the weary way she had entered the ricksha with Paul Karwaski at the dock; once again going to pick Jeffrey out of a dive.

And he wondered how she was faring on that street in Singapore. He wished he'd gone with her. . . .

After a while, he knocked ashes from his pipe, drained his scotch and soda, and stretched his long legs and arms. A Chinese boy in a starched white coat was collecting empty glasses and dumping ash trays, tidying the veranda.

Brennan hailed him and ordered a ricksha sent to the hotel steps.

"Know the street?" Brennan asked when the ricksha came up.

The ricksha puller grunted an affirmative.

"Take me there."

The puller grunted again and lifted the shafts. Brennan leaned back in the seat and fingered tobacco into the bowl of his pipe.

The ricksha bobbed along the Ningpo Road amid the bustle of traffic. The puller had a fast even stride and he made a cry now and then to warn people out of his path. They turned into a crowded lane. Shops were still open, bootmakers toiling in the artificial light. Men and women of every dress stepped casually out of the way of the ricksha. Mohammedans wearing red fezzes, Malays in sarongs, a pair of British sailors walking side by side; dark-skinned women with faces concealed beneath veils. A Chinese *towkay* went by in a ricksha, his face moonishly fat and contented. He had

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evident wealth and prestige, and blandly took no notice of the rabble of Singapore's streets.

BRENNAN called "How far?" He suspected that his puller was taking him in circles in order to increase the fare.

The boy shook his head until his straw hat nearly slipped off, but he didn't look back at Brennan, just kept up his steady trot. With each block the street drew in with shabby narrowness. Gas-jets shone sputtery yellow and blue. Soon no other rickshas were in sight, and the pedestrian traffic had thinned out to loafers ambling along uncertainly, saluting dim figures crouched in the murky shadows of doorways.

The ricksha swerved abruptly and took Brennan along an even darker street. The afternoon's rain had left broad puddles in which the bare feet of the puller splashed. Suddenly the puller stopped and looked back at Brennan.

"This it?" Brennan asked.

The coolie nodded vigorously.

"You wait," Brennan said, and boosted himself in a long leap from the ricksha. His shoes slapped on pavement and he went through a narrow door into a dimly-lighted room. There was nobody in it, but somewhere a gong gave a soft bonging announcement.

"Hello!" Brennan called. "Hello, there!"

Tiny muffled echoes came back at him, and the hidden gong sounded again. There was a faint smell of smoke, the smoke of dreams—opium.

"Hello!" he called.

His own voice answered him a muffled "hello" from the galvanized iron roof. Then, a few seconds later, a Chinese youth appeared. Brennan handed him a coin.

"Name Wong," the youth volunteered.

"Hello, Wong. I want to see white lady. Name Miss Marsha Lang. You understand?"

Wong smiled, and said *yes* with a hissing sound through his teeth.

"You show me?" Brennan asked. He gave the youth another coin. "Is she here now?"

"Yiss."

"Show me?"

"Yiss."

From the next room, beyond a beaded curtain, came the sound of soft sleepy voices, the sound of heavy breathing and snoring. Brennan guessed that at least two dozen humans were in there.

The beaded curtain parted before the bulk of a fat Chinese. He appeared old enough to be Wong's father, and like an angry father, he began to reprimand Wong in the Cantonese language. He cuffed the boy on the side of the head with his open palm. Wong pleaded, talking fast, gesturing at Brennan.

"I want to see Miss Marsha Lang," Brennan said.

The older man struck Wong again. The boy produced the two coins and the old man snatched them away and handed them back to Brennan. "Not here," he said. He kicked at Wong, and the youth scampered out of the room through the beaded curtain.

Brennan fingered the coins. "Who are you, please?"

"Kwong Chan."

Brennan bowed. "I'm looking for a white lady, Miss Marsha Lang."

"No lady here," Kwong Chan said. In the sash under his jacket, a knife handle protruded, the handle of a

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Malay *kris*. His small black eyes blinked innocently. "Not here. No white lady here."

"Wong said she was here."

Kwong Chan wagged his head. "Wong no good. Say anything. Want money. No good."

"You didn't expect a lady named Marsha Lang?"

"Not here."

"Was she supposed to come here at all?"

"Wong no good," the Chinese grunted. "All the time want money. Tell lies."

"Do you know a Jeffrey Lang? An American man? Artist?"

"Do not know. Never hear."

Brennan flipped the coins and let them jingle against other coins in his pocket. "Did a man named Paul Karwaski come here?"

Kwong Chan shook his head, shrugged fat shoulders. "Nobody here. You come wrong place."

Brennan tried another track. "You don't have to be afraid of me. I'm a friend. Friend of Marsha Lang. Friend of Paul Karwaski. Understand?"

Kwong Chan smiled. "Friend come wrong place. Nobody here. No white lady. Nobody. Too bad."

"But the boy told me, Wong, that she was here."

"Not here. Wong crazy in head. Want money. Too bad. You come wrong place. Goodbye."

BRENNAN strolled outside and climbed into the ricksha. He was certain he had had the correct address; he'd made mental note of it when Marsha Lang had showed him the slip of paper. Somebody was crazy, and maybe it wasn't just the China boy named Wong.

The ricksha puller took Brennan through narrow twisting streets back toward Raffles Square and Sanford House. Brennan puffed stolidly on his pipe. He wondered if Marsha Lang had located her brother. He wondered if the address had been wrong and if she and the man Karwaski had failed to find the wayward artist. Then he remembered that Karwaski had said he'd been caring for Jeffrey for nearly a week. Possibly, Karwaski knew where Jeffrey was. Probably. Undoubtedly. Karwaski knew the girl better than Brennan did, and knew her brother. So it followed that Karwaski was taking care of her, helping her. It was none of Brennan's business.

Yet something kept bothering him. Miss Lang had showed him an address where she expected to find her brother. And Brennan had gone there and been turned away by Kwong Chan. It struck him that perhaps something was wrong. Perhaps he should not have allowed himself to be turned away so easily.

"Go back!" he called to the puller.

The Chinese turned his head. "Back same place?"

"Same place. And fast. Understand?"

The ricksha wheeled around in sudden response and went rocking and swaying through those same dimly-lit streets, the bare-legged puller trotting between the shafts like an obedient animal.

And in less than ten minutes they were back. Brennan swung himself briskly from the ricksha and strode through the doorway into the shabby building. Nobody answered his "hello."

The gong which had sounded on his previous entrance was silent this time, and, listening, he couldn't hear the breathing of sleepers in the room beyond the beaded curtain.

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"Hello!" he called again, and again the only answer to come to him was the faintly muffled repetition of his own voice in a forlorn little echo.

He moved cautiously to the beaded curtain and parted it. Beyond, he saw a long narrow room with a low ceiling. With its oppressive mustiness mingled the smell of opium smoke. And he could see the smoke. Some of it still floated in sluggish horizontal layers, drifted and eddied in the drafts, lazily, sleepily, as though itself dreaming the dreams of its own potent drug.

The room had been deserted. Its three tiers of wooden bunks had no sleeping occupants. No dreaming heads rested on the wooden pillows.

Brennan stepped the length of the room, his shoes creaking on worn sagging boards. He opened a bamboo door and peered into another room, a similar room.

More bunks lined the walls, but these had mattresses on them, and there were two sleepers. Brennan looked at the first one, saw it was a derelict white woman. She lay sprawled on her face, one thin arm trailing to the floor where her opium pipe had fallen. Her breathing was slow and snoringly deep.

Brennan moved along to look at the second sleeper. It was the Chinese youth, Wong, lying on his back, and the sight of blood soaking the mattress gave Brennan a sudden shock. He realized at once that Wong was not sleeping. Wong was dead. His throat was gaping with a jagged cut.

IN the bunk across the room, the drugged woman slept noisily. A lizard scampered across the bare floor at Brennan's feet, and a huge moth batted its wings against the lamp over the dead youth's bunk.

Brennan let his breath escape through clenched teeth. He mopped his face with his handkerchief, and stepped the length of the room to the bamboo door on the farther side. He looked into living quarters. A stove, shelves laden with packages of food exposed to insects; mosquitoes buzzing around a pail of dishwater. There were wooden bunks there, too, and one of them had a mattress on it. But the room, like the first in the house, was entirely unoccupied.

Brennan glanced at the bunks and his eye caught something white stuffed down behind a pillow on the bunk that had the mattress. It was a handbag he'd seen before; he'd seen it in Marsha Lang's slim hands aboard the *S. S. Malaya.*

He opened the bag and glanced at its contents. There was a passport with a photograph of Miss Lang. There was a small purse containing money. And there were cosmetics, a comb, a small bottle of perfume the scent of which immediately brought to Brennan pleasant memories of Miss Lang. And there was the slip of paper which she had shown him at the dock, the paper giving this very address.

He snapped the catch, dropped the bag into the loose side-pocket of his jacket. He tried another door, the last, and it opened into another street.

He went back through the room where Wong lay dead in one bunk and the derelict woman lay drugged in another, passed through the first barren room to the outside where his ricksha waited.

A Malay policeman was strolling casually along the street.

Brennan climbed into the ricksha as the policeman passed. The officer was a slim young man in a khaki uniform, his knees bare, the pill-box on his head

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suggesting the caps of bellboys in American hotels. He smiled with a flash of white teeth at Brennan, and continued on his beat.

"Raffles Square," Brennan called to the ricksha puller. "Back to the hotel."

III

BRENNAN sat on the veranda of Sanford House and listened to distant thunder in the sky. The night was getting uncomfortably hot, but more rain would come. Colored-paper lanterns gave a soft glow to the veranda, and, inside the hotel, a dance orchestra was playing a dreamy waltz, and there was the rhythmic scrape of dancing shoes, the drone of gay voices.

Brennan smoked and wondered what had happened to Marsha Lang and what he ought to do about it. He tried to assure himself that she was in no trouble. After all, she didn't *have* to be implicated in the death of Wong; that might have been just the result of an Oriental quarrel. Naturally, after the killing, Kwong Chan and his friends and customers would quickly escape from the building to avoid police investigation.

But something about the setup kept bothering Brennan. He decided to go to the British authorities and have them locate the girl. He would say that he merely wanted to return a lost handbag to her; he wouldn't report the killing of a Chinese at Kwong Chan's. In two days he had to move up the Peninsula to deliver machinery to the tin mines, and he couldn't afford to be detained in Singapore while the police investigated a native crime he knew nothing about.

That was why he hadn't spoken to the Malay policeman outside Kwong Chan's.

Yet he wanted to make certain Marsha Lang was all right before he moved on. He would find her and return the handbag. And if she had gotten into any kind of trouble, then to hell with crated machinery and the tin mines; he would stay over in Singapore to help her.

He was just slipping out of his rattan chair to call for a ricksha and go to the authorities when footsteps sounded briskly along the veranda, and a pleasant voice cried cheerily: "Hello there, Mr. Brennan!"

Another voice said briefly: "Ah!"

Marsha Lang was on Paul Karwaski's arm. They both wore tropical evening dress. Under the soft glow of the veranda lanterns, Marsha was slimly beautiful in a clinging silk gown trailing full around her ankles and dancing pumps. A flower in her hair repeated the color of her smiling mouth, and her eyes were bright.

"This is swell," Brennan said, taking her offered hand, letting it go reluctantly to shake hands with Karwaski.

"The professor and I thought we'd dance a bit," she explained. "He says the orchestra here is the best in Singapore."

"It sounds pretty good," Brennan agreed. "You—found your brother?"

"Yes. Thank you. He's quite all right." She had said that, Brennan thought, a little too suddenly. And she turned away, pretending to be looking through the tall glass doors into the hotel ballroom. "Nothing to worry about. Jeffrey's fine. I'll be taking him back to Hong Kong next week."

"Swell," said Brennan. "I'm glad to hear it."

"Ah," Karwaski grinned. "Will you have a lime squash? A whiskey?"

"Whiskey. Thanks."

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KARWASKI strode down the veranda to hail a waiter, and, as soon as he had gone, the girl lowered her eyes and studied her clenched hands as though she felt unhappy and worried to be alone with Brennan. "Nice evening, isn't it? Much cooler. The professor says we'll have rain again inside of an hour."

Brennan said: "You found your brother—at that address?"

"Yes—that is, no. Not at that address I showed you. He'd moved. We found him at another place."

"You didn't go to the first one at all?"

"No. It wasn't necessary. The professor knew he'd moved. He took me there, and Jeffrey was doing very nicely. I'll be anxious to take him home."

Karwaski was coming toward them under the veranda lanterns, a Chinese waiter following him with a tray. Brennan whispered quickly to the girl: "I'm not dressed for the ballroom, but I'd appreciate it if you'd care to dance. I want to talk to you a minute—alone."

She flashed a nervous glance toward Karwaski as he approached. Brennan had a feeling she was going to turn the invitation down. But she said smilingly: "Professor, would you mind excusing us for a dance? Mr. Brennan has asked me."

Karwaski primped his bow tie with pudgy hands, and his smile of delighted agreement was obviously false. "Ah! Very nice. Please go. I shall have a drink. Ah."

The ballroom had dim-colored lights and turning fans in its paper-decorated ceiling. A crowd of well-dressed couples moved on the floor to the rhythm of gay music. Thunder suddenly crashed in the sky outside. The big room was stuffily warm.

Marsha Lang danced with a smooth litheness that made Brennan feel he should apologize for his heavy-footed steps.

"You wanted to speak to me?" she asked.

Over her scented blond hair, Brennan saw Paul Karwaski watching them from the distance of the veranda doors.

Brennan said: "I wanted to make sure you found your brother all right."

"I did."

"Everything is all right?'

"Yes, thank you." But she didn't look at him. Her body gave a tight little shudder as they danced.

The music was low.

Brennan continued: "I went to that address you gave me, and met a Chinaboy named Wong who told me you were there. Then a fat Chinaman with a *kris* in his belt came out and told me he'd never heard of you, never heard of your brother or Professor Karwaski. So I left."

Marsha's lips formed a forced smile. "It was very kind of you, Mr. Brennan. I guess you went to the address I showed you, but, as I say, I found Jeffrey at another place."

Brennan went on: "After I left, I got to thinking you might be in some kind of trouble because what Wong told me and what this old guy, Kwong Chan, told me didn't match. They made liars out of each other. So I went back."

"You went back?" Her eyes were startled.

"Yes. And everybody had ducked out except a woman too drugged to move. And Wong. That was the boy. He was dead. Somebody had—well—knifed him."

A gasp escaped her lips. "Singapore!" she said. "They tell me things like that happen when Orientals get

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to quarreling. Did you report it to the police?"

"Not yet."

THE music stopped for a moment and they were in the following dance before she spoke again. "I wouldn't report it, if I were you, Mr. Brennan. The police are apt to make it complicated for you. And you have your own business up the Peninsula. You can't afford to be delayed. I'm sorry you walked into a terrible situation like that, just trying to locate me. It was all my fault. I shouldn't have bothered you with my personal troubles."

"You didn't go there at all?" he asked again.

She shook her head, waved smilingly across the floor to Paul Karwaski in the veranda doorway. "No, Mr. Brennan I didn't go there."

"Then I guess I'd better be tactful."

"Tactful?"

"Yes. I guess I'd better not return your handbag."

She stared at him, haunted by worry and fright. *"My handbag?"*

"I found it. Intended to get the authorities to locate you so I could return it. I found it at that address."

"Found it?" She couldn't meet his eyes. Her body became so tense she was no longer dancing well.

"In the back room of Kwong Chan's," Brennan explained. "Stuffed behind a pillow. It's in my pocket now. Shall I give it to you?"

She grabbed his arm as though she expected he was even then reaching into his pocket. "Please! Not now! Leave it at the hotel desk when I've gone. I'll pick it up tomorrow, or sometime."

"You didn't want Karwaski to see me hand it back to you, did you? You don't want him to know I went to Kwong Chan's the second time, do you?"

"Please—please don't ask me many questions, Mr. Brennan."

"I know why you and the Professor came here tonight," he went on. "It wasn't just to dance, not just because the professor said this was the best orchestra in Singapore. You both wanted to find me."

"Find you?"

"Yes. On the boat this afternoon I let you know I was staying at this hotel. Karwaski heard it. And he knew I went to Kwong Chan's looking for you—at least he knew I went there the first time. You were both in the back room at the time. Karwaski was afraid I'd keep looking for you. So he brought you here and told you to let me think you'd found your brother and that everything was okay."

She spoke one word against his shoulder, a whisper: "Yes."

"Karwaski doesn't want me meddling. He wants me to leave you alone and go away. And for some reason you're helping him."

"Please—please, don't keep asking questions and saying things, Mr. Brennan. I'm quite all right. So is my brother. It'll be best for all of us if you forget the entire—incident. Just leave my handbag at the desk tonight. I won't let Karwaski know when I pick it up. It'll be much better that way. Let's forget about the whole thing."

"Are you *sure* you want me to forget it?"

She didn't look up at him. "Yes . . ."

"Very sure?"

"Yes, thank you. And when we go back to the veranda let's pretend to be casual, that we haven't talked like this. We'll say goodbye. It was nice to meet you, Mr. Brennan. Perhaps—well,

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maybe we'll run into each other again sometime."

"You're afraid of Karwaski," he stated flatly. And when she didn't answer, he added: "But *I'm* not afraid of him. Tell me what the trouble is and I'll go after it."

"Please, don't. Let's just say goodbye. Don't report to the authorities, don't do anything. I'm very grateful to you, and I'll be more grateful if you'll just go away. People meet on shipboard, and then they separate; that's the way it always is."

"You're in a jam," Brennan said.

She smiled in an artificial, very sophisticated way. "It's just your imagination, Mr. Brennan."

"What hotel are you staying at?"

She shook her head. "You've been reading too many books about intrigue in the Far East. Thank you for the dance, and thank you for being kind. . . ."

The music had stopped before Brennan was aware of its stopping. He took his arms from her and noticed that the dancers were leaving the floor and that Paul Karwaski had come toward them.

"Ah," said Karwaski.

"I think I'd like to return to Jeffrey," Marsha told him. "It was nice of you to bring me, Professor, but I'm tired."

"Ah. Certainly. Good night, Brennan."

Marsha gave Brennan her hand, and Karwaski clapped him on the shoulder, saying: "Your whiskey is on the veranda, old chap. Sorry we can't stay. See you again some time."

Brennan watched them go down the veranda steps and hail a ricksha. He wanted to follow without their knowing it, but he realized they'd spot him if he tried such a stunt.

He turned to a Chinese waiter who was picking up empty glasses on the veranda. "Want to make twenty dollars?"

The waiter set down his tray. "Twenty dollah?"

"Yeah. There's a man and woman getting into a ricksha. Follow them, understand? Not let know you follow, understand?"

The Chinaboy nodded owlishly.

Brennan went on: "There they go now— in that ricksha. Here's money for your fare. I'll give you twenty when you come back and tell me where they go. Understand?"

The boy smiled. "Understand twenty dollah."

"Yeah. And no tricks. If you give me the wrong address, if you don't really follow them, I'll have you fired. Understand—*fired?*"

The Chinaboy slipped swiftly down the steps from the veranda to the street.

IV

RAIN lashed from a somber night sky, rain that beat down against the hotel angrily. There was wind, too, a violent *Sumatra* that blew rain under the veranda eaves.

Bill Brennan went into the lobby and took a chair near the open front door. He didn't know how long he might have to wait for the return of the boy, so he picked up a two-day-old copy of the *Malay Express* and glanced over the recent news.

Dance music drifted pleasantly from the next room, but the soft melody had little importance against the rush of outside rain, the frantic gurgle of water in drain-gutters.

At first Brennan gave little attention to the newspaper. He perused an item describing a typhoon which had damaged a Dutch schooner on the Java

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Sea, read about the construction of a new school in Kuala Lumpur, about a Malay child who had been attacked by a tiger somewhere up the Peninsula. Then something caught his eye and held it. He read the item carefully, more than once.

It told of the theft of an ancient Oriental masterpiece in Shanghai. The painting, thought to be the only existing work of the great Chinese artist Wu Taotzu, had disappeared several days previously from the House of Li where it had been treasured and revered for many generations. The House of Li, a venerable family of Chinese merchants, offered a reward of approximately fifty thousand American dollars for the return of the masterpiece.

The newspaper traced a brief history of this valuable painting. Wu Taotzu, as near as could be estimated created the work sometime before 900 A.D. Several generations later and long after the death of the artist, the painting passed into the hands of the House of Li.

Many world collectors had offered huge sums of money to the House of Li but the masterpiece could not be purchased. Its owner stood faithful to the taste of their ancestors.

However, the House of Li, for the cause of art and study, had sanctioned the making of several copies of the original. Two of the copies had been done by a Japanese artist; the other had been made two years previously by an American named Jeffrey J. Lang.

Brennan tore out the column, folded the torn section of paper and tucked it into his pocket. Then he went upstairs to his room.

It was a small hot room at the back of the hotel. He groped into mangled clothes at the bottom of his badly-packed steamer trunk until his hand contacted cool steel. He produced a Swiss Luger pistol, which he hadn't fired in nearly a year, and checked the cartridge clip. He stuck the loaded gun into the belt of his trousers, around to one side, and drew his linen coat over it, buttoning the middle button. When he stood in front of his dressing mirror, he saw to his satisfaction that the bulk of the gun didn't show through his coat.

HE left the room, locked his door, and went downstairs again. Entering the cocktail bar he ordered a Planter's Punch.

It was nearly a half hour longer before the Chinaboy returned.

"Well?" Brennan asked. "Where did they go?"

The boy stood close to him, whispered: "Twenty dollah, please?" He was wet from the rain.

"Where?" Brennan asked.

"House on Mandarin Road. On crossing Pahang Road. House have balcony over front, upstairs. Not much lights. Malay sit in doorway, have knife in *sarong*. Bad place."

"I'm not asking your opinion of the place," Brennan said. "Do you think white lady stayed there?"

The boy nodded. "White lady go inside with white man. Pretty soon, lights upstairs. I climb up on balcony. Malay not see me. I look in glass. White lady all alone in room."

Brennan slipped the money to the boy, saying: "If that's not the truth, I'll get you fired from hotel. Understand—*fired?*"

The boy bowed and smiled, and Brennan went out on the veranda and down the steps to the street. The rain had gone as suddenly as it had come. Once again, street lamps threw shim-

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mering yellow into dark pools of water on the rough pavement; *Sumatra* wind still blew in sly gusts.

Brennan hailed a ricksha and told the coolie puller to take him to where Mandarin Road crossed Pahang. It was in the same section of the city as Kwong Chan's. A bad district. The coolie knew it; his mouth parted over yellow teeth.

"Smoke pipe?"

"Shut up," said Brennan.

"Nice ladies?"

"Shut up," Brennan repeated.

The coolie lifted the shafts and became a draft animal between them. His straw hat bobbed and danced; his bare skinny legs flashed in steady running rhythm in the light of street lamps.

Brennan lounged back against the cushions of the ricksha, easing the Luger's pressure from his side. The coolie glanced back now and then, smiling briefly. The streets got narrow, were mere alleys, always dimly lighted. The ricksha bounced and swayed.

Where Pahang crossed Mandarin, there was little light. Stars winked faintly in an open patch of sky, and a red moon hung over the roof-tops, its glow challenged by a crowding march of thick ominous clouds. Brennan got out of the ricksha on Pahang Road.

"Wait right here," he said.

Standing at the intersection, he could see the dim façade of a building which had a balcony running across its second story. No other building within his vision had a balcony.

He walked slowly down the center of the narrow rutted street. It got very dark, clouds blowing across the moon, blotting it out, and pedestrians were mere shadows slipping along in the night.

Brennan passed the building with the balcony, and as he did so he noticed a figure squatting in the dark doorway. He guessed this to be the Malay to whom the hotel waiter had referred, the Malay with the *kris*.

BEYOND the building, between it and the next, there was an alley so narrow two men passing in it would have had to flatten themselves to the walls. Brennan studied the shadowy overhang of the building's balcony. No stairs led up to it from the outside, and he wondered how the Chinese hotel waiter had managed to climb up without being seen from the street. He realized that somehow the waiter must have done it from inside the alley, so he entered, guiding himself through utter darkness by groping with his hands along the walls. Shortly, he came to the end. His hands encountered only blank wall, and he concluded the alley was blind, a mere channel of ventilation for the upper floors of the adjacent buildings.

Slowly, even more cautiously, he retraced his steps through the alley. Beyond the mouth of it, he could see a section of the dimly-lighted street, see pedestrians passing. His hand knocked against something round, a metal tube, which proved to be a drainpipe descending from the roof. He saw the answer now, saw it after another minute of investigation.

Pulling himself up the drainpipe wasn't easy. Twice his grip slipped on the smooth metal and he dropped several feet into the alley. No one passing on the street, he knew, could see him; he was in the darkness of a cave.

On the third attempt at climbing he got high enough to find a horizontal ledge. It felt only a couple of inches wide but it was a big help, and he

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continued up the pipe until he stood erect, his toes carrying most of his weight on the ledge. Then he explored the wall with the fingers of one hand until he found a window sill slightly higher than his head.

Transferring his hand-grip to this sill, sidling inch by inch along the lower ledge, he moved toward the mouth of the alley. He had only some six or eight feet to go, but it seemed an endless time until he hooked a leg over the balcony railing. Then he was on firm footing once more, breathing heavily, wiping sweat from his face and hands.

Frail wavering light made twin patches on the balcony floor; the light came from a window and from a glass panel in a door. He stepped soundlessly to the window, which was nearer than the door, and peered through grimy panes into a room as ornate as an Oriental temple.

At first he thought the room to be unoccupied. Nothing stirred in it except flickering flame from two gas jets and the watery waver of the light they cast. It was a majestic room. Its walls were hung with brocaded curtains and its floor was covered with a deep-piled Oriental rug; there was a statue of Buddha squatting on an altar-like table between unlighted joss sticks; everywhere there was a gleam of polished brass, the dignity of bronze and teakwood. The brocaded curtains of the walls draped over the ceiling like a tent, drew to a peak in the center, and from that high peak hung a colored-paper lantern shaped like a balloon.

Then Brennan saw the room was not occupied. Someone was sitting in a teakwood chair, a chair built to the proportions of a throne. He recognized the white evening gown, the small slippers; he recognized the soft blondness of Marsha Lang's hair. She sat slumped over in the chair, motionless, her elbows resting in her lap, her face resting in her hands. She didn't even seem to be breathing.

He tapped lightly on the glass.

MOTION, life, abruptly came into her body. She took her hands down, sat erect in an attitude of listening for the repetition of the sound that had brought her out of her trance.

Brennan tapped on the glass again.

She rose to her feet and stood staring, a little frightened, at the window. He knew she couldn't identify him, that from the lighted room he must appear no more than a vague outline of a man. She started toward a heavy door that led to some other room. Her steps were uncertain, and she kept glancing back over her shoulder. The long dancing-gown made pleasant swirls about her legs, was in sharp contrast to the deep color of the rug.

Once more Brennan tapped, lightly, cautiously. She changed her mind halfway across the floor, went to a table and picked up a long slim dagger. Then she walked purposefully and unafraid toward the window.

Brennan smiled at her through the grimy glass. He didn't speak, but tried to make his mouth go through the movements of saying. "Hello, Miss Lang; it's Bill Brennan."

Her hand with the dagger in it dropped to her side. She didn't return his smile, just stepped along behind the wall to the balcony door. He heard a bolt snap back, saw the patch of light get longer as the door silently opened. He stepped briskly into the room, and she closed the door behind him.

"Mr. Brennan— How did you get here? Why?"

He produced her handbag from the

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pocket of his jacket. "In the first place, I wanted to return this."

Still she didn't show any smile, but she wasn't angry. "I thought I told you—"

"To leave it with the clerk at Sanford House? Sure. You didn't want Paul Karwaski to realize I'd gone to Kwong Chan's a second time looking for you. But I've delivered the bag in person, and Karwaski still doesn't know the difference, does he?" His smile became a friendly grin.

"You shouldn't have come here. Why did you?"

"Because you're in a jam, and I think one reason you wanted me to forget the whole thing is you don't want me to get into the same jam. Am I right?"

She stared at her clenched hands. "Not entirely. There's someone else I'm thinking about."

"Sure. Your brother." He produced the newspaper clipping from his pocket. She glanced at it, glanced up at Brennan's face, glanced away. He said: "This is what the trouble is about, isn't it?"

Her shoulders moved just a trifle. "I guess so. But I do wish you'd go away, Mr. Brennan. I'm not telling you to mind your own business, because I appreciate your attitude. I'm grateful to you. If there was anything you could do, I know I could count on your willingness to do it. But there's nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Very sure." She looked with direct challenge into his eyes. "Why did you take that item from the paper?"

"Because it told me what your trouble was."

"You really know then?"

"I think so."

"Do you really think my brother . . ."

"Do *you?*" Brennan countered.

SHE sat in the chair, pressed fingers against her jaw, pressed her lips out of shape. "You won't tell anyone, will you, Mr. Brennan? I can see how you've guessed. You put two and two together—what I'd told you on the boat about my brother, and then the newspaper item."

"You don't think I'd make extra trouble for you, do you?" he asked.

She shook her head without taking her hands from her mouth. "No. I trust you, of course. It's just that there's nothing you can do to help."

"Are the authorities on his trail yet?"

"I don't think so."

"Do they suspect him?"

"I don't think so." She sighed. "But they may, yet. They may investigate everyone who ever saw the painting at the house of Li. That's what the professor says."

Brennan rubbed knuckles over the nape of his neck, thinking. "This Chinaboy, Wong, who was knifed at Kwong Chan's— Your brother wasn't connected with that, was he?"

She looked up, sharply defensive. "Certainly not! Jeffrey may be bad, but not *that* bad. If he took the painting—"

"Has he confessed to taking it?"

"Confessed?"

"I mean, has he admitted it to you? That he stole it?"

"No. I haven't really had a chance to talk to him. But I guess he took it, all right. He's not a thief, of course. But he loved that painting. And maybe drugs weakened his character. That's what Professor Karwaski thinks."

Brennan sat on a carved teakwood bench. "Look, Miss Lang. If your brother hasn't actually told you he stole the painting, how do you know for sure that he did?"

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She took her hands down and looked steadily at Brennan as though his words had imparted to her some magic thought she'd never before considered.

"You'd better tell me about the whole thing," he suggested.

V

SOMEWHERE a shutter banged in the night wind. Somewhere there was a faint tinkle of Chinese music. Brennan walked to the heavy door on the other side of the room and asked: "Where does this go?"

"A hall."

He saw that the door was bolted, glanced around the room, noted that there was no other opening but a bed alcove, the window, and the glass-paneled door leading to the dark balcony. He came back to Marsha Lang, pulling the bench close to her chair.

"Is anybody apt to interrupt us?"

She shook her head. "I'm supposed to have retired for the night."

"Then tell me. All of it. From the beginning."

Sumatra wind rushed against the front of the building in a fierce surge, rattled the balcony door, chattered the window in its flimsy casement as though unseen persons were trying to enter. The sudden sound of it frightened Marsha Lang. But only momentarily. Then she was poised again. Her lips formed a fleeting smile.

"Just the wind."

He nodded. "That's all it is."

Her hands were in her lap but not at ease. Nervously she laced and unlaced her fingers. When she spoke it was in a husky monotone, a whisper, and she kept glancing toward the door as though fearing an eavesdropper.

"I came to Singapore in response to a letter from Jeffrey. He said he was sick and stranded. That's happened many times before—as I told you. Always Jeffrey writes to me to come and get him. He never writes to father when he's in trouble because, as I told you, father doesn't know about these periods of—well—degradation. So I came from Hong Kong on the *S.S. Malaya,* where you and I met. At that time I didn't know anything about the theft of the Wu Taotzu painting in Shanghai. Do you believe me?"

"Naturally." It wasn't just courtesy that caused him to say it. He realized that had she known of the theft she wouldn't have talked so easily to a stranger about Wu Taotzu, and her brother, and the copy of the old masterpiece her brother had once made.

She went on, "When Professor Karwaski came to the boat to meet me, I still didn't know of the theft. It was while the professor and I were riding in the ricksha, going to Kwong Chan's, that I learned about it."

"He told you?"

"Yes. He gave me a clipping from a Singapore newspaper. I guess it was the same item you showed me a few minutes ago. He broke the news to me gently. He said that Jeffrey had gotten 'high' on drugs and had stolen the painting from the House of Li. The professor is very fond of Jeffrey, is closer to him than the ordinary business associate. His chief concern is to get the painting back without anyone knowing that it was Jeffrey who took it."

A slow cynical grin twisted Brennan's mouth. His eyes became low-lidded, sharp. "How much is the professor charging you to fix this up? To get your brother out of the jam?"

FOR a moment she stared at him, confused, making no sense out of his statement. Then she said. "Oh—

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that; I see what you mean. But it's not true. You quite misunderstand. The Professor is not a blackmailer. I'm giving him no money. He's trying to save Jeffrey merely because he's interested in Jeffrey's career."

Brennan shrugged. "Sorry. Please go on."

"Well, the professor took me to that address I'd gotten from Jeffrey."

"Kwong Chan's?"

"Yes. Jeffrey was in the back room, sleeping from opium. The Professor said he'd been keeping him there for nearly a week. He was afraid if Jeffrey got out of his sight he might tell somebody, in a careless moment, about stealing the painting."

"Where's the painting now?"

"I guess the Professor has it. He'll return it as soon as he can find a way to do it without implicating Jeffrey."

"Will the Professor collect the reward?" Brennan asked cynically.

"Please don't keep misunderstanding; money doesn't enter into this."

The cynicism didn't leave Brennan's face but he cocked a polite eyebrow. "No?"

"Absolutely not."

"Sorry. Please go on."

"Well, Jeffrey was drugged in the back room at Kwong Chan's."

"You didn't talk to him?"

She shook her head. "He was . . . asleep. The Professor and I talked over plans for getting the painting back. We were still there, in the evening, when you came to the front room. The Professor said that of course we couldn't let you find me, because we'd have our hands full with Jeffrey and the painting. If you, or anyone, happened to be around when Jeffrey woke up, you might learn about the theft; he might babble a confession. So Kwong Chan sent you away."

Brennan added: "Not until after the young Chinaboy nearly tipped me off."

"Right after you left, we got Jeffrey into a ricksha and came to this place. Kwong Chan followed. I didn't know anything about the boy's having been killed. I guess I left my handbag there, though I didn't miss it until later in the evening."

"I can tell you the rest of it," Brennan said. "Like I told you when we were dancing, Professor Karwaski brought you to Sanford House to look me up and have you assure me your brother was okay so I wouldn't follow you around any more. Evidently, Karwaski was pretty anxious to steer me off the trail, because you were even afraid to let him know I'd gone to Kwong Chan's a second time and discovered your handbag."

"Yes. I didn't want you to get into trouble. I trusted you, of course. But I knew the Professor wouldn't."

Brennan fished out his pipe and gnawed the cold stem, making no attempt to fill and light the bowl. His eyes had a brooding, far-away look in them. "So the Professor brought you back here after you saw me at Sanford House. Is your brother here?"

"He's out in the garden. In the cook-house."

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes."

"To talk to?"

"Well, not exactly. The Professor let me wave to him through a window of the cook-house. I told Jeffrey not to worry, and he said to me: 'Don't you worry either, sis; everything'll come out all right.' Then the Professor brought me to this room. That's all."

BRENNAN caressed his pipe, rubbed the matured wood against his palms. Wind surged against the

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window again, rattled it angrily. He said: "Is that all the conversation you had with Jeffrey?"

"Yes. The Professor was afraid I might upset him. So I just waved to him from the garden. And Jeffrey waved back through the poles."

"*What* poles?"

"In the cook-house. The window is sort of barred. I guess it's to keep thieves out."

Brennan rose so quickly that he nearly knocked over the bench on which he'd been sitting. "Are you sure it's to keep thieves out? Or is it to keep Jeffrey *in?*"

She stared at him. "You mean you think Jeffrey's being kept a prisoner?"

He paced the length of the room without answering, studied the bronze Buddha on the altar. When he came back to her, his shoes were swift and soundless on the thick rug. "Look. Doesn't this strike you as a queer set-up? The Professor was so anxious I shouldn't find you that he had Kwong Chan clear out of the house down there. They even killed the boy, Wong, because they figured Wong might tip me where you were if I offered enough money. And the next queer thing, aside from Karwaski's bringing you to the hotel to steer me away, is that you haven't *once* had a real talk with your brother about the stolen painting. All you know is what Karwaski tells you. And your brother is locked up in a cook-house, and Karwaski only lets you wave to him from the garden. Why is Karwaski afraid to let you talk to your brother?"

She sighed and looked at her hands. "Please, don't keep misunderstanding. I've known the Professor for three years. Jeffrey has known him for five." Yet she didn't say that with much conviction. Her lips trembled and worked, and her hands remained nervous in her lap. "Do you really think that he might be trying to blackmail us?"

Brennan shrugged.

"Do you think—" She gripped the arms of the chair until her knuckles showed white. "Do you think the Professor himself had something to do with the theft and that he's trying to put the blame on Jeffrey?"

"Frame-up?" Brennan shrugged. "It might be either of those things. Or it might be something else. But you must admit it's about time you stopped being led around in the dark; it's about time you found out whether he's playing square with you and your brother."

She gave an almost imperceptible nod. "You don't think he *is*, do you?"

"No."

"Is there any way we can find out—I mean without his knowing we doubt him?"

"I think so," said Brennan. "If I can sneak back to that cook-house and have a talk with your brother. If Karwaski's on the up and up we'll forget about it. If he isn't—" He broke off and asked suddenly. "How can I get back to the cook-house without being seen?"

At first she told him the only way into the garden was through the house. Then, under his questioning, she remembered that the wall at the end of the alley went across a corner of the garden. It was a high wall with iron spikes on the top of it.

"Swell," Brennan said. He unbuttoned his coat, and the rounded butt of the Swiss Luger drew her eyes. He hauled the pistol from his belt, handed it to her. "Know how to work one of these gadgets?"

"Yes, but . . ." Her eyes were astonished.

He said, "If Karwaski isn't on the level, there may be some trouble. Take

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the gun and wait for me out on the balcony. If everything's on the up and up, I'll be back in less than an hour and tell you so."

"And if it isn't?"

"Just stay on the balcony for at least an hour. Don't let anybody come near you. You've retired for the night, and nobody has any right to come into this room. If anybody tries it, even the Professor, tell them to go away. And if anybody goes inside, no matter what excuse they give, then fire three shots into the air. The sound will carry a long way, and this district is pretty well patrolled by police. The shots will bring them to investigate. Will you promise to do that?"

She nodded, bewildered.

"If," he went on, "they should try to approach you through the room, or up the balcony from the street, even after you've fired the three shots, then use the gun to defend yourself. I don't mean against the police, of course; I mean anybody *but* the police."

She handled the Luger a little gingerly. "I'm afraid, Mr. Brennan."

"Nothing to be afraid about," he assured her. "You'll be safe whatever happens. So will your brother. I guarantee it."

"But how about *you?*"

He gave a short, pleasant chuckle. "Don't worry about *that;* wherever I go, I take my Guardian Angel."

VI

THE rain had come again. It made a rush of sound on the balcony roof and fell in fast sheets, like thin waterfalls, from the eaves.

Brennan squeezed Marsha Lang's hand reassuringly before he swung his legs over the balcony rail. She was wearing a transparent rubber raincoat, and she held her right hand inside of it, with the gun. Her face was white.

Brennan had removed several sections of drapes from the Oriental room and now he tossed them down into the blackness of the alley. Once more he maneuvered along that narrow ledge, his fingers hooked on the window sill now wet from the rain. He went down the slippery drainpipe to the pavement, found the drapes he'd tossed down ahead of him, and carried them in a bundle back deep to the end of the blind alley.

He made a rope out of the drapes, tying the ends together, working swiftly in the dark. When he had finished the makeshift rope, he knotted one end into a noose, swung the loop in easy circles, like a cowboy with a lariat, cast it upward. It fell back again at his feet. He tried again and again. The rope of knotted drapes became soggy from rain water. Finally, the noose didn't seem to come back; it was caught fast to one of the spikes on the top of the wall.

Using this rope, Brennan scaled the wall, gripped the spikes and crouched there, hauling the rope up behind him. Out of the blackness of night flashed lightning. In its momentary glow he saw the garden below him on the other side of the wall, an Oriental garden thickly-grown, orderly in lay-out. Trees dripped in the rain, swayed before the driving gusts of rain. Farther out in the garden, there was a dim outline of a building with a light showing yellow behind its two barred windows. He guessed it to be the cook-house.

After the flash of lightning, the darkness was complete, and thunder crashed distantly. He lowered his rope of drapes into the garden, leaving the noose held fast to the spike. In another second, his shoes were in the soft slush of a flower bed.

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When the lightning came once more, he used its brief flash to find a path toward the cook-house. He went along swiftly in the dark, with thunder cannonading in the black sky over his head, and when he got to the cook-house his clothes were soaked. Standing in mud, flat against the building, he peered cautiously over a window ledge.

The window was partially open, and he looked into a room cluttered with cooking utensils, two huge stoves and a brick bake-oven. The room also had an iron cot, and a white man was lying full-length on it, his fingers laced behind his neck while he stared at the ceiling.

The man was youngish, thin, very long in the legs and arms. A three-day growth of beard against the paleness of his flesh made him appear a little sickly and frail. His eyes stared at the ceiling, broodingly, and a cigarette in the corner of his mouth smouldered sullenly and had dropped a speckle of gray ashes on his bearded chin.

Brennan studied the man, studied every corner of the room until he was sure it had no other occupant. He noticed that this kitchen had been recently put to a new purpose, a sort of artist's studio. There were three easels with thin wooden boards on them. One of the boards had an intricate Oriental painting upon it, a painting of dragons, birds, a sunset—against a flat landscape. The painting appeared to be finished, and it looked like a very poor job to Brennan. It looked like something you could buy for twenty-five cents in any Chinese Quarter of any city in the world. The boards on the other two easels had identical paintings, just as bad. In fact, they looked even worse, because neither of the others was finished.

Tubes of oil paints lay cluttered on a table. The table also held charts, vases with brushes—thin artist's brushes—and scraps of wood on which colors had been tested.

Brennan called softly: "Hello, there."

THE thin man cocked his head. He took his hands from behind his neck, braced them on the cot mattress. His eyes lost their far-away dreaminess, became shifty, nervous.

"Hello, there," Brennan repeated.

The thin man swung his legs off the cot, sat up abruptly, staring at the window from which Brennan's voice had come.

"Keep quiet," Brennan advised. "Are you Jeffrey Lang?"

The thin young man came to the window and gripped the wooden bars with long-fingered hands. "Who the hell are *you?*"

"I'm a friend of your sister. Name's Brennan."

"How'd you get here?"

"I climbed over the wall."

"You're a friend of my sister?"

"Yes. I'm trying to help her. And help you, too."

Young Lang's mouth twisted scornfully. "Never mind about *me!* How about sis? Did you get her out of here?"

"She's all right," Brennan said.

"Did she escape?"

Brennan didn't say anything for a long moment. He studied Lang thoughtfully. "Escape?" he muttered at last.

Lang waved one hand impatiently. "Yeah. Sure. Did you get her out, or is Karwaski still holding her?"

"Was Karwaski holding her?" Brennan asked.

"Don't be a fool! Of course he was.

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I guess he still is—you seem to be awfully stupid about the whole thing."

Brennan scratched his jaw, thinking, and finally he said: "I get it. Karwaski gave you the idea he was holding your sister a prisoner and you believed it."

Young Lang stared at him. "Huh? Sure. He's holding her. He hasn't hurt her yet, has he? I've been doing *my* part. I've got two jobs started. Been working all afternoon. I don't want him to hurt her. He's a dirty—!"

Suddenly, Brennan saw the whole thing. He pointed a finger through the bars of the window at the finished painting on the easel. "Is that cheesy-looking thing your own work, or is it—"

Jeffrey Lang interrupted with a scornful snort. He went to the easel, placed his fingers gently on the bottom of the painting as though it were some fragile, virginal, spiritual creation that would become contaminated by human touch. "This cheesy-looking thing," he said, "is an original Wu Taotzu, probably the only authentic Wu Taotzu in existence today. This cheesy-looking thing, as you call it, is over a thousand years old. This cheesy-looking thing is worth about a quarter of a million dollars."

Brennan's mouth formed a soundless whistle and he said in a whisper: "You didn't steal it from Shanghai, did you?"

Lang frowned belligerence. "Who said I did?"

"Karwaski, I guess. At any rate, he's got your sister believing it."

"Sis really believes it?"

"Almost—not quite. But you didn't steal it, did you?"

"Don't be a fool!" the young artist snapped.

Brennan nodded slowly to himself. "How long's Karwaski been holding you a prisoner?"

"About a week. Will you get me out of here?"

"In a minute. Has Karwaski been trying to force you to make copies of the painting?"

"Yes."

"And at first you refused, and then he got your sister and threatened her, and that forced you?"

Lang waved an impatient hand. "Will you get me out of here, or won't you? There's a Malay that comes to look at me every hour or so. He's due here any time." He pulled at the heavy bars. "Got a knife?"

"No. How about the door?"

"Padlocked."

"Does the Malay have a key?"

"Yes—in his belt."

"I'll wait for him, Brennan said.

FOR nearly ten minutes Brennan crouched behind the trunk of a palm tree just outside the door to the cook-house. The rain poured ceaselessly. Now and then lightning made blue flashes through the dripping garden, always followed by deep darkness and the heavy boom and smash of thunder.

In one of the flares of lightning, Brennan saw the slim shape of the Malay coming down the garden path from the house. Then the lightning had gone, and there was only the dark night, full of rain, and the sound of thunder in the sky.

It took only seconds for Brennan's eyes to become accustomed to the blackness again, and he made out the figure of the Malay passing within a few yards of him. He jumped at the native's back. His right arm hooked around the man's neck, locked there with the force of a vise suddenly pulled

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tight. At the same time he slugged hard blows with his left fist into the man's back.

They both went to the soggy ground in a struggling heap. The Malay tried to cry out, but the cry was choked off by the tightening of Brennan's arm. Still Brennan slugged with his left fist, blows that dug deep and hard into the small of the back, and very soon, the man let out a sighing gasp, and Brennan knew that he'd pounded the breath out of him.

"Key!" he whispered at the native's ear. "Where is it? Key to cook-house."

The Malay lay gasping.

"Where is it?" Brennan kept demanding. "Do you want to be hit again?"

The man suddenly rolled free as Brennan found a bunch of keys on a ring. Lightning glared bluely in the sky, gave a weird unreality to the garden, its trees lashed by the blowing wind, drenched by the angry rain. The Malay had drawn his *kris*. The blade flashed; the Malay's teeth showed in a fighting grin.

Brennan lurched to his feet, ducked the swinging blade as the garden plunged into darkness again. He heard a grunt from the Malay, then only the overhead crash of thunder. They fought fast and hard in the dark. The *kris* struck in a flat blow against Brennan's shoulder. The Malay's breath was warm on his cheek. They fell to the ground again, rolling in the mud. Brennan felt thin hands on his throat; he slammed his fists in short, chopping blows, and the Malay squirmed away.

Feet pounded in the mud. In a flash of lightning, Brennan saw the Malay racing back toward the main house. No use giving chase; it was too late.

Brennan still had the key ring. He groped his way to the door of the cook-house, found the padlock. His fingers seemed big and clumsy, and slippery in the rain. There were half a dozen keys on the ring. He knew he was playing against time now; in another few moments the Malay would return with men to help him attack Brennan.

Jeffrey Lang was banging his hands on the other side of the door. "Are you all right?" he called desperately. "Are you still there?"

"Hold everything!" Brennan responded.

Finally a key fit the lock. The lock didn't turn right away. Sweat mingled with the rain on Brennan's face. Then the padlock opened and he swung back the door.

Lang was wrapping something in pillow cases.

"The Wu Taotzu," he said nervously to Brennan. "I can't leave it here; can't leave it in the hands of these rats."

"Hurry up," Brennan snapped. "We don't have much time. The man got away . . ."

HE GRABBED Lang by the wrist and pulled him through the doorway into the rain. Lang tucked the covered painting under his arm, shielded it against his thin body. Brennan dragged him along, half running. Lang stumbled and slipped many times in the mud.

They got to the wall backing the alley, and Brennan said: "There's a rope of drapes hanging here. Climb! I'll boost you by the feet."

Then shafts of light came out of the dark, not lightning this time. The shafts came from a pair of electric torches. Both torches were held by the Malay Brennan had fought a short while back. Two men were with him—Paul Karwaski and Kwong Chan.

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"Stand still!" Karwaski ordered. A nickel-plated revolver shone like a piece of mirror in his hand. "I'll shoot to kill," he said without exictement.

"You will please kindly not move," Kwong Chan added, and he patted the blade of the knife he carried.

Lang sagged limply against the wall and his eyes looked afraid. Hugging the painting close to him, he glanced at Brennan with the expression of a man who expects to die and who looks for some sort of moral strength in the comrade who is to die with him.

Karwaski mouthed an order to the Malay and both electric torches concentrated on Brennan. In the light of them Brennan stood like a statue, his hands on his hips, a twisted cynical smile on his lips.

"Ah," said Karwaski. "It is none other than my friend from the boat. Brennan, I believe. It's unfortunate you have come here meddling, that you have 'stuck your chin out' as the Americans say."

"Go to hell," Brennan said quietly.

Karwaski shrugged his shoulders loosely, and there was a certain smugness to his gesture with the revolver in his hand. "I am very much afraid that it is *you,* my dear Brennan, who will be going to hell. Ah."

Brennan didn't move, didn't speak.

"You will please walk back to the cook-house," Karwaski snapped. "Both of you. At once!" He gestured once more with the gun.

Lang glanced nervously at Brennan, glanced at the gun in Karwaski's hand and the knife in Kwong Chan's. Then he took a few shuffling steps in the mud, obeying the order. He glanced back and saw Brennan wasn't following him.

"You as well," Kawarski said to Brennan. "Go at once, please! Ah."

Still Brennan didn't move. He gave a short amused laugh, and Karwaski's eyes narrowed in rage.

"Does it amuse you so much that I may kill you? You will move at once or I shall shoot!"

Brennan laughed again. "You don't scare me a bit."

Karwaski's rage grew until the revolver trembled in his hand, its nickel-plating giving off sparkling flashes in the light of the torches. "I believe I shall kill you at this very moment. Ah. Yes, I shall."

VII

DEEP inside of him, Brennan felt a twinge of fear. Yet he knew he couldn't show it. His life depended on his not showing it. Maybe Jeffrey Lang's life also depended on it. Brennan began to whistle to himself, hardly audibly. His manner, the manner with which he wanted to impress Karwaski, was one of complete self-confidence.

"You are very sure of yourself," the Professor smirked. "Perhaps you will not be quite so sure of yourself when I shoot."

"You won't shoot."

"And why not?"

"Because you'll be sunk if you do. As a matter of fact, you're sunk right now."

"Please explain what you mean," Karwaski demanded.

"I mean the police are probably coming in the front door right now. They've probably got the place surrounded."

"You are lying."

"Think so? Well, listen to this, you dope; you don't think I'd come in here to get young Lang without some protection, do you?"

"I think you are bluffing," Karwaski said, but not with much convic-

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tion. Brennan's cocksure manner bothered him, worried him, just as Brennan had hoped it would.

"If you think I'm lying, or bluffing, why don't you take a run upstairs to the room where you believe Miss Marsha Lang is?"

Karwaski eyed him narrowly. "Miss Lang is there now."

"Think so? I wouldn't be so sure of it, if I were you."

Karwaski turned his head and spoke to the Malay. Brennan got the gist of it; the Professor was ordering the man to go upstairs and bring Miss Lang down to the garden. "If she will not come, then bring her *regardless!*"

The Malay passed the torches to Kwong Chan and trotted silently into the house. Brennan smiled to himself; this was exactly what he wanted, the situation he had forced.

"We shall soon see whether or not you lie," Karwaski said.

"I'll say we will. It won't be long now . . ."

It wasn't long. Three pistol shots cracked sharply in the night. Brennan knew that the Malay had tried to force entrance into Marsha Lang's room, and that the girl, from her place out on the balcony, had fired the Luger as Brennan had advised.

Karwaski's big body grew tense, while the revolver in his hand wavered a little, and he stared at Kwong Chan. "The police?"

Brennan laughed. "Sure, it's the police. Or maybe you think I'm still bluffing?"

Karwaski wiped a hand across his brow, wiping away moisture. Some of it was rain; some of it, Brennan thought, was sweat.

Kwong Chan's face lost its Oriental blandness. His eyes became black buttons over the twin beams of light from the electric torches. "I am thinking it is necessary we hasten away," he said to Karwaski, and the moment he said that, Brennan jumped into action.

BOTH Karwaski and Kwong Chan had been thrown off guard by the firing of the three shots in the house, by their own fears, and neither of them saw the start of Brennan's rush at them.

"Watch out!" the Professor warned the fat Chinese, but the warning came too late.

Brennan's shoulder bucked against the Chinaman with the full force of a football fullback hitting the line of scrimmage. Kwong Chan and the electric torches went to the muddy ground together, and Brennan whirled to dive at Karwaski.

The revolver went off twice as Karwaski tried to kill Brennan, but Brennan had his wrist, and in another second had wrenched the gun away.

A sudden glare of lightning revealed Kwong Chan getting to his feet, rushing toward Brennan with the *kris* held ready.

"Look out!" Jeff Lang shouted.

The *kris* bit a deep gash in Brennan's shoulder. Kwong Chan swung once more. There was nothing Brennan could do but shoot to save his life. He shot. Four times the gun sent hot sparks through the wet rainy night before it clicked empty. A grunt came from the Chinaman and he fell flat.

Karwaski landed on Brennan's back and fought with the frenzy of a madman. They fought in the dark and in the rain. Sometimes the lightning flashed. Overhead there were peals of thunder. Karwaski kneed Brennan in the ribs, and Brennan sprawled flat.

Young Lang had picked up a stick and hurled it. But the artist didn't have

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much strength; the stick bounced harmlessly off Karwaski's elbow.

The Professor turned and started to run toward the back of the garden. Brennan was after him, dodging around trees, wet limbs smacking his face. At the far end of the garden, in a brief glare of lightning, he saw Karwaski trying to scale a wall. With his left hand he grabbed the man's collar and pulled him back. His right fist smashed Karwaski in the mouth.

Karwaski tried to kick Brennan in the groin. The shoe dug sharply at Brennan's thigh, knocking him down. The other end of the garden, back toward the main house, became bright with hand-torches, and several Malay policemen came running through the rain, their clubs drawn.

Karwaski made a last desperate effort to scale the wall, but Brennan grabbed him around the legs and pulled him down. They rolled over in the mud, fighting. Brennan slugged Karwaski's jaw with short rights and lefts, and finally Karwaski went limp, lay back motionless on the ground.

When Brennan stood up he felt groggy and tired. His lungs burned from heavy breathing, and he was wet all over with rain and sweat and mud. His shoulder bled down his arm, and there was a cut over his eye that bled too, and the knuckles of both his hands were raw.

The rain had stopped and the garden was bright with flashlights and the lights from the main building. Malay police grouped around Brennan and were solemnly courteous while they awaited the arrival of British authorities.

"Do you feel all right, old chap?" Jeff Lang asked Brennan.

"I'm fine."

"I don't know how to thank you, old chap. I mean for saving my life, and all. And saving this Wu Taotzu."

MARSHA LANG came swiftly along the walk through the wet garden and into the bright circle of lights. She stood within a few feet of Brennan, looking at him anxiously, and said: "Where's Mr. Brennan?"

Brennan said: "Huh?"

"Mr. Brennan. What have you done to him?"

Jeff Lang laughed. "This is Brennan, sis. I don't wonder you can't recognize him. He's all mud and gore."

She had her handkerchief out and was wiping off Brennan's almost unrecognizable face. "Are you badly hurt?"

"Not at all."

"But your face is cut. And your arm—"

"I feel fine."

She smiled. "I shot the pistol as you told me to."

"I'll say!" he grinned. "And it saved us a lot of trouble."

"The police came just as you said. I shot three times and then three times again. A man was trying to get in the room."

"I know," Brennan said. "I sent him."

Karwaski sat up in the mud, suddenly leaped to his feet and started to run. A Malay policeman, whose uniform made him resemble a bell-hop, swung his club in a swift arc that ended against Karwaski's skull. Karwaski spilled into the mud and didn't get up.

Marsha Lang said to Brennan: "I guess the Professor turned out to be a crook, after all, didn't he?"

"Yes. He stole the Wu Taotzu from Shanghai. But his idea wasn't just to hold it for ransom. He had a plan

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whereby he thought he could make a fortune. But he had to have your brother to help him."

She turned suddenly on Jeffrey. "Were *you* in it?"

Brennan cut in: "No, he didn't mean to be. But one time he made a copy of that painting and it was so good it almost passed for the original. So Karwaski's idea, after he stole the painting, was to have Jeffrey make a lot of good copies. Then while the paintings were still supposedly stolen, Karwaski would sneak around to collectors and secretly sell the copies as the stolen original. He could sell them all over the world. Each collector would think he was getting the real thing, and would pay Karwaski a lot of money for it. Naturally the collector couldn't tell anybody about the deal because he would know the painting to have been stolen when he bought it. In that way Karwaski was safe.

"So after he'd played his racket all over the world, he would return the original to the owners in Shanghai and top the whole thing off by collecting the reward money of fifty thousand dollars. Altogether his little plan would net him well over a half million dollars —if he got away with it."

"And Jeffrey helped him?"

"No. That's where the trouble started. Your brother refused to help him. So Karwaski kidnapped him, brought him here to Singapore and tried to force him to paint the copies. Still Jeffrey refused."

"Naturally," said Jeffrey. "I've been a friend of the House of Li ever since they let me make my copy for art purposes. When I knew the painting was stolen from them I wouldn't have anything to do with Karwaski. He kept me here. Opium—he knew my weakness."

"Your real weakness," Brennan said, "was your sister. He knew that too. So he lured her here with a letter from you, forged probably. And he let you believe he was holding her prisoner and would bring her to harm unless you painted the copies of the Wu Taotzu as he ordered. That tied *you* up. Then to tie *her* up he told her a bunch of lies about how you stole the painting from Shanghai and how he was just trying to keep you out of trouble. He played you against each other. Then when he saw I was friendly with Miss Lang, he tried his best to steer me away. He thought I might interfere."

Marsha Lang asked: "Do you think he killed that Chinaboy, Wong?"

"I think he ordered it done. He was afraid I'd locate you through Wong. Wong was the kind of boy who'd tell anything for money. They didn't trust him. But I imagine it was Kwong Chan who actually did the killing, because it was done with a knife in the Oriental way. Karwaski's weapon is a revolver."

"Can we prove it all?" Jeff Lang asked.

"We can when the British authorities start sorting out the evidence and getting to work on Karwaski."

Marsha Lang's eyes had a nice glow in them as she looked at Brennan. Her figure was trim and small in the eerie light of hand torches, the yellow light from gas jets in the house. "You've been grand, Mr. Brennan. The only reason I didn't want you to find me was because the Professor told me you might find out Jeffrey stole the painting and that you might expose him. That's why I didn't want you to return my handbag."

Brennan grinned and began to wipe mud from his shirt. "I returned it, didn't I?"

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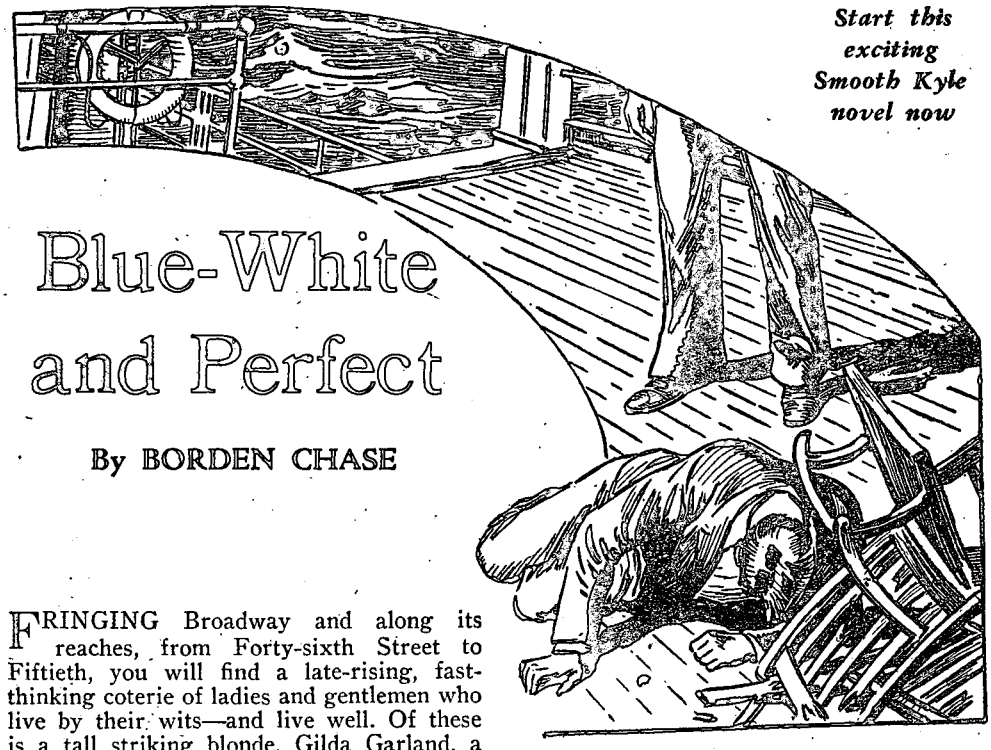

Blue-White and Perfect

By BORDEN CHASE

FRINGING Broadway and along its reaches, from Forty-sixth Street to Fiftieth, you will find a late-rising, fast-thinking coterie of ladies and gentlemen who live by their wits—and live well. Of these is a tall striking blonde, Gilda Garland, a girl who possesses both beauty and a subtle probing intelligence. Before she met and fell in love with "Smooth" Kyle, a Treasury Agent, who is very handy with a gun, Gilda worked for Rod Martell, an international gambler. Martell has just returned from abroad and he phones Gilda and asks her to meet him in a small bar off Broadway.

It does not take Gilda long to find out what is on Rod's mind. Rod is engaged in some very intensive diamond smuggling and he doesn't want interference from the Treasury Agents whose duty it is to operate against Customs offenders. More especially he doesn't want interference from the Treasury's ace invesigator, Smooth Kyle. Gilda, Rod suggests, is used to the best, but if she marries Smooth she will have to get along on a small pay-check. And look at the risks Smooth takes. . . . Why not persuade Smooth to give up the government service and Rod will give him a job at five-hundred a week?

GILDA does not commit herself definitely. But when Smooth Kyle gets in town she has him meet Rod Martell. Smooth, recognizing Rod as an international crook, will not talk to him. A few minutes later when Smooth and Gilda go for a walk, someone takes a few shots at them. "That's only a warning," Gilda tells Smooth. "When they want to hit you with one of those bullets they'll use a machine gun. Smooth, you can't fight this bunch. I know. They're tough. Please, Handsome, don't be stupid all your life. Resign. You can't stay on your job unless you feel like telling me to go to hell."

"All right," Smooth says. "Go to hell, my dear."

Later, Smooth follows Martell aboard a boat bound for Cuba and overhears enough of his conversation with a young woman named Sonia Clonet to realize that she is a member of the smuggling combine. Martell leaves the ship, but Smooth phones his boss, McNeary, and tells him to bring down some clothes because he, Smooth, is going to Cuba with Miss Clonet. At the boat McNeary tells Smooth that he thinks Martell, aware that Smooth followed him, has devised the Cuba trip as a ruse to get Smooth out of the way. But Smooth, regardless, sails. When the lovely Miss Clonet, on the pretense of taking his picture, has him stand near a cargo boom and the boom falls, nearly hitting him, Smooth realizes that McNeary was probably right. . . .

This story began in last week's Argosy

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V

THE CAPTAIN IS CRUSHED

IT WAS past noon of the second day at sea when the telephone rang in Smooth's cabin. An officer requested him to report to Captain Sutherland, as an investigation was about to be started to determine the cause of the accident at sailing time. Smooth said he would be along in a few moments, tossed the receiver on the hook and seated himself in the most comfortable chair in his cabin. For a time he stared fixedly at an open port, thinking—trying to marshal a number of facts and place them in some semblance of order.

From the day he had started work with the Treasury Department he had never been handed a case with quite so many odd angles as appeared in this. In the first place, the Department knew diamonds were pouring into the country in a steady flow. It was presumed Rod Martell was the head of a ring of smugglers but there was no evidence to convict him. Next, Smooth was sure Sonia Clonet was Martell's accomplice. In fact, Sonia had practically admitted this. And she had laughed when he suggested she work with him.

Smooth was starting the case with the cards stacked against him because the peope he was watching were perfectly aware of his connection with the Treasury Department. On the ship was at least one other member of the mob who had tried to kill Smooth. The sailor who dropped the boom at sailing time was a short, dark-faced fellow with a wide pair of shoulders. Smooth decided he was a Cuban employed by Martell to do the rough work—an occasional killing or two. And if this were so, there were probably others aboard who were working for Martell.

Adding together what he knew, Smooth realized the *Princess Nola* must be an important part of the smugglers' scheme. The ship was undoubtedly being used to transport the diamonds. But how were the stones taken past the Customs? How many of the crew were in the deal? How many of the officers? . . .

The idea stopped Smooth. If the ship's officers were part of the mob, what chance had he of reaching Cuba? He had thought no outright attempt would be made on his life—no quick shot or knife work. Such a killing would start things boiling at the Department and a crowd of hard-faced Treasury Agents would quickly even the score in their own peculiar manner. But if the ship's officers were willing to cover such a killing—turn their backs while Smooth's body was tossed over the rail—and then enter the death in the ship's log as "lost at sea" . . .

"Nice work," said Smooth aloud. "Perhaps I should have stayed on a hack."

He left the cabin and headed toward the bridge. As he walked past the long rows of cabin doors he suddenly realized the tremendous responsibility entrusted to the captain of a passenger ship. Hundreds of lives were in his keeping. Women, children, people who closed their cabin doors at night and slept peacefully, trusting to the captain to take them across a dark and lonely ocean. The ship was a little kingdom shut off from the rest of the world. And the captain was the guardian of this kingdom.

As he thought, Smooth turned in his mind the many stories that had been told of the sea. He tried to recall just one where the captain of a passenger liner had been proven a coward or a thief. He searched his memory for a

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single instance. And as he thought a slow smile came to his lips. In all the world there was no group of men with a cleaner record than the captains of these ships. Smooth decided to bank on the record and play his cards from the top of the deck. He knocked at the door of the captain's cabin and stepped inside in answer to a gruff summons.

"My name is Kyle," he said. "You sent for me, Captain Sutherland?"

"Glad to know you, Mr. Kyle," said the captain. "Take that chair near the table. It's the most comfortable one, I think."

SMOOTH seated himself and studied the captain carefully. He was a tall man and thin. Years had stooped his shoulders slightly but they had not taken any of the sharpness from a pair of eyes that were now fastened on Smooth. They were blue eyes—like water that is deep. There was a knowledge of men and the sea in them. Above them were gray eyebrows. And Captain Sutherland's hair was gray, too. He seated himself opposite Smooth and offered a box of cigars.

"No, thanks," said Smooth. "I'll smoke a cigarette, if you don't mind."

"Go right ahead," said the captain. He lit a match and extended it. "There are some questions I would like to ask about that accident on the forward deck. The investigation will be held in a few moments but I thought we might clear up a few points first."

"That suits me," said Smooth.

"Was there any particular reason for you to stand under that boom while the crew was working?"

"A very good reason."

"What was it?"

"I suppose to be killed."

"What?" snapped the captain.

"That's right," grinned Smooth. "A girl put me on a spot but her luck was terrible."

"I'm afraid I don't understand you."

Smooth extended a leather wallet in which were his credentials. The captain studied them and his lips drew to a straight line. He folded the wallet and handed it back to Smooth.

"Just what has been going on aboard my ship?" said the captain. "Would you mind explaining, Mr. Kyle?"

"Glad to," said Smooth. "Some diamond smugglers have been using the *Princess Nola* to bring stones into the United States. One of the mob knows who I am. In some way she arranged with that sailor to get rid of me."

"But how?"

"I don't know, yet," said Smooth. "But I suppose he is working for the same boss as the girl."

"That's possible," said the captain. "The man's name is Pedro Blanco and he's been a member of the crew for the past six months. His papers are all in order but that means very little. I'll keep him in the brig for the rest of the trip and turn him over to the authorities when we dock."

"Oh, don't do that," said Smooth. "As a matter of fact, I wish you would whitewash the whole affair. Listen to his story and agree that it was an unavoidable accident. And by all means don't discharge him when we reach Cuba."

"Why?"

"If you do discharge him," laughed Smooth, "someone else will take his place. And I'd rather fight someone I know than someone I don't."

"But I'm certainly not going to have a murderer in my crew."

"He won't be in it long," said Smooth. "I doubt if he'll make the return passage."

"What makes you say that?"

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"He hired out to a tough boss. The crowd he's working with don't excuse mistakes. And they seldom give a man a second chance. Pedro had better watch his step in Cuba or—"

Captain Sutherland's fingers beat a rapid tattoo on the table top. His teeth worried his lower lip and he stared hard at Smooth.

"As serious as all that," he said quietly.

"Yes," said Smooth. "This crowd is after big money. A few lives aren't going to mean much to them."

"Who is this girl you say is one of the mob?"

"Miss Clonet—Sonia Clonet."

"Ridiculous! She can't be."

"I'm sure she is."

"That's hard to believe."

Smooth laughed. "Oh, I don't think she realized she was mixed up with a bunch of killers. But she's in now, and she's got to play it through. Just how much do you know about her, Captain?"

CAPTAIN SUTHERLAND passed a weather-beaten hand across his eyes and drew a deep breath. "Miss Clonet has been making trips with us for the past three years. I understand she is the buyer for a women's dress shop in Havana. In fact I know she is."

"You know her very well, Captain?"

"Yes. She's a very charming woman and—"

"Very charming and very beautiful."

"We've been together quite a bit."

"Nothing serious, I hope?"

There was a pause while the captain looked out at the sea. "Not now," he said. "No—not now."

"Suppose I tell you what has happened," said Smooth. His smile was gone and he leaned toward the captain. "About six months ago Sonia Clonet took a decided interest in you. She stopped being a casual passenger and became a very good friend. Perhaps she made it clear that she would be interested in a proposal of marriage by a sea captain—"

"Please stop," said Captain Sutherland.

"Am I right?"

"I'm afraid you are, Mr. Kyle," said the captain slowly. "I had intended to ask Miss Clonet to be my wife after this passage."

Smooth's lips tightened and he whistled softly. For a moment he turned away and stared out across the expanse of ocean. The wind was scarcely a breath against the wide reach of blue. But there was motion there. Long swells rode in from the horizon and lifted the bow of the ship—signs of a storm that had beaten itself out before it reached the coast. And when Smooth turned to face the captain he found the officer erect in his chair. He was square-jawed, calm.

Smooth pounded the flat of his hand against the table. "This is a rotten job, Captain," he said. "I wish it hadn't been necessary to tell you."

"I'm very glad you did, although it isn't particularly pleasant to have someone shake you out of a fool's paradise."

"Will you answer a few more questions?"

"Certainly."

"You say that Sonia has been a buyer for a dress shop in Havana for the past three years?"

"Yes."

"That's strange," said Smooth. "This mob has only been operating for about six months. I wonder if Sonia was on the level until she was talked into this deal?"

"I'm afraid I can't answer that."

"Do you know the name of the shop?"

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"Gonzales and Company on the Prado in Havana. Juan Gonzales has owned the shop for at least ten years to my knowledge."

"He still owns it?"

"I think so."

"Is his reputation a good one in Havana."

"Very good," said the captain.

Smooth laughed. "We're getting nowhere in a hurry. Do you know where Sonia lives in Havana?"

"She has a small place in town. On Avenida de los Alcaldes. I've been there quite often."

"Well, so much for that," said Smooth. "If Sonia asks you about me please tell her as little as possible. Don't let her know I've told you of my connection with the Treasury Department."

"You're making it rather difficult, Mr. Kyle."

"I haven't any choice."

"What shall I say about the investigation?"

"Oh, tell her I dismissed the whole thing with a shrug. She'll think I'm trying to be smart and she won't ask too many questions. But try not to show her any change in your attitude."

"She sits at my table, you know."

"So do I," grinned Smooth. "At least —I will from now on."

THERE was a light tap on the cabin door and Smooth looked inquiringly at the captain.

"Who's there?" called Captain Sutherland.

"Miss Clonet. May I come in?"

Smooth leaned closer to the captain. "Keep her here about ten minutes after I leave, if you can."

The captain nodded and called, "Come right in, Miss Clonet!"

Surprise touched Sonia's face when she saw Smooth. She smiled and seated herself near him at the table.

"I didn't expect to find you here," she said. "Am I interrupting a business call or is this merely a social visit?"

"A little of both," said Smooth. "Captain Sutherland is worried about that affair at sailing time. He's been asking questions but I told him it was merely an accident that could have happened on any ship."

"An accident?" said Sonia.

"Yes. Wasn't it?"

"Why—of course."

"Mr. Kyle has asked not to be included in the investigation," said the captain. "He's been very generous about the whole affair."

"Has he?"

"Sure," said Smooth. "It's just one of those things."

"In that case, I shan't ask you to appear," said the captain. "Nor you either, Miss Clonet."

"Thank you, Captain," said Sonia.

"But I wish you would be kind enough to tell me exactly what you saw when the boom fell?" asked the captain.

"Well—"

"I think I'll run along," said Smooth. "See you both at dinner this evening."

He left the cabin and hurried to the lower deck. A few passengers smiled to him, but he did not stop. When he came to his stateroom he stepped inside and opened one of his bags. From it he took a bunch of keys and a long thin tool used to open stubborn locks. He closed the bag, pushed it under the bed and went on deck. There were few passengers aboard as the Cuban run was hardly the one for summer vacationers. But at intervals along the deck people were seated in deck chairs enjoying the sun and the cool breeze that swept in over the rail. Smooth started

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forward and then stopped suddenly as though he had forgotten something. He retraced his steps but continued past his stateroom to the door of Sonia's cabin. He leaned against it and tried a key.

The door opened and Smooth stepped inside. Immediately he was conscious of the heavy odor of perfume—Sonia's perfume. It came to him from the open closet door where he could see a variety of dresses hanging in orderly array on racks. Near the door was a small chest of drawers and Smooth crossed to it. He opened the top drawer. A neat bundle of letters bound with a rubber band was on top of some filmy handkerchiefs. Smooth snapped the band over his wrist and glanced at a slip of paper on the top of the bundle. He grinned when he saw the penciled message.

Smooth, darling—it read— *These won't interest you at all. Just letters from some old friends. When you search the other drawers please be careful. Some of my things are very expensive.*

"Smart dame," said Smooth.

He glanced at the letters and tossed them back into the drawer. Then, in spite of the note, he started a painstaking search of Sonia's cabin. Something—a single lead that may have seemed of no importance to Sonia might give him the break he wanted and so badly needed in this case. As he searched he felt like a man who had been tossed into a prize ring with his hands tied. For the present there was little he could do but duck and hope his opponent would break a leg.

He was crouched over a bottom drawer of the dresser when he heard a faint metallic click. With the sound Smooth threw himself to one side and turned. Above him he saw Tibbs, the steward. A nickeled water-carafe was traveling in a short arc that terminated when the pitcher slammed against the open drawer.

SMOOTH straightened and the palm of his right hand jarred against the steward's chin. Tibbs staggered backward and fell over a chair. He sprawled on the cabin floor and sat there gazing at Smooth with a dazed and stupid expression.

"Oh—it's Mr. Kyle!" he gasped.

"That's the name," said Smooth. "But what made you decide to christen me with that water bottle?"

"I—I thought you were a thief, sir," said the steward. "When I glanced in through the port I saw someone bending over that lower drawer. I was sure it was a thief in Miss Clonet's cabin."

"Then why didn't you call an officer?"

"There was none about, sir," said Tibbs. "Besides—I wanted the credit myself. I wanted to catch you."

"Credit?"

"Yes, sir," said Tibbs emphatically. "The captain would have promoted me if I caught a thief. Perhaps made me Chief Steward."

"And now I suppose you're disappointed?"

"Well—not exactly. You are a thief, aren't you?"

"Now, Tibbs," laughed Smooth. "Is that nice?"

"But you must be, sir. I'll have to take you to the captain."

"Could you forget the whole thing for about five dollars?" asked Smooth.

"That's bribery, sir. I don't take bribes."

"And you insist upon taking me to the captain."

"Certainly. This is very, very irregular."

There was a light laugh and Smooth turned to find Sonia standing in the

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doorway. Her hands were resting upon her hips and she looked slowly from the open drawer to the battered carafe lying on the deck. Next she glanced at Tibbs and laughed again at the puzzled expression on the steward's face.

"What's all this?" she asked.

"I caught him, Miss Clonet," said Tibbs. "I caught him right in the act, I did."

"And now he wants to take me to the captain," grinned Smooth. "Do you think he should?"

"It won't be necessary," said Sonia to Tibbs. "I really don't mind if Mr. Kyle pokes around in my cabin."

"But it's very irregular, Miss," said the steward. "Very, very irregular."

"Forget about it, Tibbs," said Sonia. "Mr. Kyle and I want to be alone."

"Very well, Miss," said Tibbs as he hurried out of the cabin. "I won't say a word about it."

SONIA closed the door and turned to face Smooth. Her smile was one of amusement—as though she had caught a small boy doing something he should be ashamed of.

"Did you get my note?" she asked.

"I got it."

"Then perhaps you just wanted to see if my underwear was really imported? Do you approve of it?"

"Go take a jump in the ocean," said Smooth.

"Oh, Smooth, you're acting like a kid," she laughed. "If you're one of the best men in the Treasury Department it's no wonder people can smuggle diamonds."

"Go ahead," said Smooth. "Rub it in. But in my trade we don't mix love and business. You've got to give us credit for that, at least.' '

"Meaning?"

"Captain Sutherland is in love with you, Sonia. You've made him think you'd like to be his wife. And that was rotten."

"How do you know that?"

"A fool would know it after listening to him tell what a wonderful woman you are," said Smooth. "He thinks you're the tops."

"And you told him I was a—"

"I told him you were charming and beautiful." That at least, was part of the truth, Smooth thought. He had told Captain Sutherland exactly that.

"Does he know you are a Treasury Agent?"

"Did you tell him?"

"Of course not."

"Then what makes you think I run around with a badge pinned on my chest?"

"You might just as well," laughed Sonia. "You're very obvious."

"We talked about you," said Smooth. "Captain Sutherland says you are a dress buyer for Gonzales and Company. Is that so?"

"Certainly it is. But you insist I'm a diamond smuggler."

"I know you are."

"Do you ever expect to prove it?"

"Very soon."

"Until you do," said Sonia, "can't we stop fighting and enjoy ourselves?"

"How?"

"Well—it looks as though we are going to have very nice weather on the trip. You *might* spend a great deal of your time with me. Showing me the ocean under the moon. Telling me I am beautiful."

"I'll be damned!" cried Smooth. "Do you expect every man you meet to make love to you? First Captain Sutherland, then me, then—"

"Why not?" laughed Sonia. "Most men find me interesting. I've never had any complaints."

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"Listen, Gorgeous," said Smooth evenly. "There's a girl in New York—a blonde with a short temper. If her eyes were crossed and her nose was broken in six places she could still make you look like yesterday's coffee. Stop kidding yourself and powder your nose."

"Is her name Gilda?"

"*Miss* Garland, to you, Babe!"

"I've heard of her," smiled Sonia. "But I've also heard that blondes are out of style this season. Most gentlemen have learned to prefer brunettes."

"That's swell!" said Smooth and started toward the deck. "Because I'm no gentleman!"

CHAPTER VI

DOWN TO THE SEA

AT THE dinner table Captain Sutherland sat very erect in his chair and looked straight ahead. He spoke when he was addressed but seldom offered a word otherwise. Smooth thought he had never before seen such weariness in a man's face. He tried to make casual conversation.

"Are we going to have good weather this trip?" he asked. "So far it's been too good to be true."

"That's just the trouble," said the captain quietly.

"What do you mean?" asked Sonia. "Can a thing be too good to be true, Captain?"

"I'm afraid it can, Miss Clonet," said the captain. "As for the weather—there was a storm warning on the radio a few hours ago."

"A bad one?" asked Smooth.

"Very," said Captain Sutherland. "The last reports say it is making up to a bad blow."

"How thrilling," said Sonia.

"Don't ask for it," advised Smooth.

"No—not when you've put in a lifetime at sea, Miss Clonet," said the captain. "There comes a time when a man no longer wants to fight and beat his head against the wind. He wants peace. Security."

"Why, I'm surprised to hear you speak that way," said Sonia. "It doesn't match the stories people tell of Captain Sutherland."

"I'm sorry," he answered slowly. "Perhaps I'm boring you folks. If you'll excuse me I would like to return to the bridge."

"Certainly, sir," said Smooth and he stood while the captain left the table.

There were only two other passengers at the table—a Mr. and Mrs. Attleby who were stockholders in the steamship company. They ate silently and excused themselves when coffee was served. Smooth suggested a liquor but Sonia refused. She looked thoughtfully at Smooth for a time without speaking.

"Why so silent?" he asked.

"Just thinking," she answered. "And wondering how much you have told Captain Sutherland about me."

"That shouldn't worry a girl like you," laughed Smooth. "One more conquest in a long career—"

"Please don't," she said.

"As you wish," said Smooth and pushed back his chair. "May I walk with you to your cabin?"

"I'm not going to my cabin," she said. "If a storm is coming I'd rather stand on deck and watch it."

"Let's go," said Smooth.

HE took Sonia's arm and walked with her from the dining salon. For a time they paced the promenade deck watching the sluggish rise and fall of the seas. There was a stillness in the air that had the ominous feel of

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an unvoiced threat. Light gusts of wind danced at times across the water and tugged at the strands of Sonia's hair. On the dark horizon clouds were building against the stars—curtaining them and moving toward the ship.

"There's a place on the top deck," said Sonia, "where I sometimes stand. No one has ever been there with me. A little place where I can be alone and dream." She walked a few paces and turned to look at Smooth. "Would you like to go there with me—just for a little while?"

"Won't I intrude upon those dreams?"

"No," said Sonia.

They climbed a steep ladder that took them to the deserted boat deck. They walked silently to a railed spot on the port quarter. Below them foam from the cutwater was white against the blackness of the sea. At times a streak of phosphorous glinted for an instant and then was gone.

"This is the place," said Sonia. "Sometime I stand here and pretend the *Princess Nola* is my yacht—my very own. And I dream it is taking me far off to some deserted island where palm trees nod against the sky. There's a home there, with tall columns and wide verandas. Flowers, all red and gold and fresh with the fragrance of the sea, line the walks that lead to my home. And I—"

She stopped abruptly and turned away from Smooth. Her arm was resting against the rail and her head was tilted in profile to the star-filled sky. There was a softness about her face now, a wistful tenderness that had been missing in the hard light of day.

"Go on," said Smooth quietly. "I'm listening."

"Aren't you going to laugh?" she asked. "I'm being such a fool."

"I wonder if you are," said Smooth. "Perhaps you're saying aloud the things most of us merely think. Just for these few moments you're not Sonia Clonet as the world knows her. You're a little girl—dreaming."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've stood and dreamed with another little girl who has grown tall and learned to put on a brittle front when she faces the world."

"With Gilda?"

"Yes," said Smooth.

"I envy her," said Sonia.

A sudden wind walked across the sea and whipped the words from her mouth. She caught at the rail and lifted her chin. The wind flattened her dress against her figure and caught at her hair. She leaned into it, laughing. Smooth steadied himself as the ship rolled in answer to the lift of a marching wave. Thin voices spoke in the rigging. Each line and stay sang a single note that blended in wild chorus. The storm was announcing its presence and the ship made answer.

"Shall we go below?" asked Smooth.

"Oh, no," said Sonia. "I want to see it. I want to watch it from here. Don't you?"

"All right. But it's getting cool."

"Then I'll go down and get a wrap. Please wait for me."

"Can't I get it for you?"

"Don't bother. I'll be back in a moment."

SMOOTH watched her as she crossed the deck to the ladder leading below. It was strange, he thought, that a woman who could look into the night and talk of dream palaces could also be working with a crowd of men who would stop at nothing to make money. Women were always a puzzle to Smooth. At times they could

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be soft, lovable, almost childlike in their sweetness. Then, in an instant, the mood would be gone. A hardness would come into their eyes and an edge to their voices. Smooth had seen this happen with Gilda. He had seen her cold-eyed, hard, a smoking gun in her hand that had thrown sudden death at one of Smooth's enemies. A moment later her arms had been about his neck and she was crying, trembling, begging him to quit his job and go away with her. Women! They were a mystery Smooth never hoped to understand.

He swung into the wind that was gathering force as it tossed the ocean in wild tumult. It carried a smother of cool salt spray whipped up off the wave tops. The wetness stung his eyes and he lifted his arm to screen them. Then he stepped away from the rail toward the lee of a nearby deckhouse.

A dark figure moved above him. And a heavy deck chair was thrown out of the night. It slammed against Smooth's head. His upthrust arm broke the full force of the blow but the weight of the chair carried him to his knees. A dullness settled in his mind. His head throbbed with sudden pain and unconsciousness crept over him. Instinctively he fought against it. Like a fighter who has walked into a swinging right-hand punch to the chin he grouped blindly with his hands and tried to see through the gathering darkness.

A man leaped from the roof of the deckhouse and started toward him. Dimly, Smooth saw arms reaching out. He shook his head and tried to clear it. Reason was gone but instinct carried Smooth's hand to his gun. It came clear of the shoulder holster and Smooth squeezed hard. Yellow flame leaped from the muzzle. He pushed the gun blindly before him and fired again. And again. The figure staggered and started to run. The wind was screaming now, lashing against the lifeboats and rattling the canvas covers. All about him was sound and confusion. And slowly his mind cleared.

He staggered to his feet and grasped the rail. No use following the man who had thrown the chair. No need, in fact. Smooth had recognized him as the sailor who had dropped the boom. Pedro Blanco had made his second try.

The storm was growing with each minute that passed. Tall waves lifted the ship and rolled it hard over. The bow climbed, hung for an instant as though pointing at a distant star, then slipped in a drunken lurch along the curve of a sea. At times the ship's propellers fought clear of the churning water under her stern. The *Princess Nola* leaped then, bucking like a badly-broken horse. Smooth hooked an arm about the rail and let the wind rush against his face. It cleared the cobwebs from his mind and eased the throb in his temples. There was a lump above his left ear and he lifted his hand to find the skin broken. He dabbed at the cut with a handkerchief and smiled ruefully.

Only a few short moments ago Sonia had been talking of islands with palms that reached into the skies. It had been a pretty picture drawn by a beautiful woman. But even while she was talking Pedro had been crouching in the darkness waiting for her to leave. Smooth shook his head. He had never met a gunman nearly so dangerous as this soft-eyed girl—never one so utterly ruthless. He looked into the darkness near the ladder and saw a white figure coming toward him. The light from a lamp at the top of the ladder touched a woman's face. It was Sonia. The collar of a fawn-colored polo coat was turned up about her ears. The wind had

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tumbled her hair into streaming disarray. She fought her way across the deck to Smooth.

"Did you miss me?" she asked lightly.

"Not much," said Smooth. "And your friend Pedro didn't miss me, either."

"What are you talking about?"

"Three guesses. Are you surprised to find me still aboard ship?"

"Of course not. I didn't expect you to jump overboard."

"But Pedro might have tossed me."

"I wish you'd stop talking in riddles and take my arm," she said. "The wind is a little too strong for me."

SMOOTH slipped an arm through hers and looked down into her eyes. Sonia tilted back her head and lifted her lips. She smiled. Her hands went up and rested against his face. Smooth knocked them down. He caught her roughly by the arms and forced her against the rail.

"Swell fun, isn't it?" he said quietly. "You're one of those sweet-faced dames that likes to dish it. But I wonder if you can take the stuff you dish?"

Her eyes were wide. "Stop! Smooth . . . what are you doing?"

Slowly his arms were forcing Sonia's back across the rail top. Her head and shoulders were arched painfully. He added pressure to his arms and her feet lifted clear of the deck. As the ship rolled in a monstrous sea the weight of her body tipped toward the outer side of the rail. She screamed and caught at his shoulders.

"Pedro wanted to do this to me," said Smooth. "Just this—Gorgeous. And then he would have pushed a little harder—like this."

Terror was in Sonia's eyes. She turned her head away from Smooth and she screamed at the black water sliding past beneath her. Smooth's laugh was hard. He braced his legs against the roll of the ship and forced Sonia farther across the rail. Never before had he been possessed with such a desire to destroy a human being as at this moment. Time and again Smooth had shot it out with his enemies. He had thrown lead with wild-eyed gunslingers and pulled the trigger of his automatic with the cool, dispassionate touch of a mechanic at a lathe. It was his trade and he seldom allowed hatred to enter into it.

But this was different. Sonia Clonet was trading upon the fact that she was a woman. She had used a combination of charm and wistful simplicity to put Smooth on a spot. True, he hadn't trusted her. He knew she was working with Rod Martell and a gang of killers. But because of this fact he had expected a certain willingness on her part to accept danger and death. In his own words, Smooth had known she could hand it out. But now he knew Sonia Clonet could not take it.

He thought for a moment of another girl who had laughed as she walked into a gunman's bullets. Gilda Garland hadn't screamed when the luck went against her. She hadn't whimpered and called for help. But Sonia Clonet was different. She was yellow. And Smooth hated a coward.

"Ready to die?" he asked shortly.

"No—please don't!" she cried. "You can't—"

"Why not?" said Smooth. He forced her shoulders farther over the rail. "A moment ago it was my turn. Now it's yours."

Sonia's eyes closed and Smooth saw a fringe of long dark lashes against her cheeks. Her lips were tight and showed her teeth clenched beneath

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them. Her breathing became more regular and her hands loosened their grip on his shoulders.

"Go ahead," she said. It was almost a whisper. "Go ahead—only—please get it over."

And then she laughed. It was a pitiful, shaky laugh with little mirth in it. But it was an effort. Sonia Clonet was doing her best. If this was the blackout she would try to go as she knew Smooth would go—laughing.

"You win, Gorgeous," said Smooth.

SMOOTH lifted her from the rail and set her upon her feet. For a time she rested limply against the rail. Then she stretched and rubbed the arch of her back. Smooth watched her in silence. When a mountainous wave hammered against the ship's side he sheltered her from the torrent of water that followed. She leaned against his shoulder and smiled when she looked up at him.

"They told me you were a killer, Smooth," she said. "But until tonight I didn't think you'd drop a woman into the middle of the Atlantic."

"Neither did I," said Smooth. "And just between the two of us, Big Eyes—I think I'm a sucker for not finishing the job."

"I thought you were going to."

"That's good. It may slow you down a little the next time you decide to bump off one of the boys."

"But I didn't know—not this time," she said. "Please believe me, Smooth."

"Forget it," he said. "And now let's get out of here before the wind finishes what Pedro started. This storm is just one breath short of a hurricane and in ten minutes the *Princess Nola* will be standing on her ear. You better duck into your cabin and call it a night."

"I don't want to do that," she protested. "If the storm is going to be bad I want to see it. Let's go forward on the bridge where it's sheltered."

"Passengers aren't welcome there," grinned Smooth. "The officers will have plenty to do without us in their hair."

"I'm sure Captain Sutherland won't mind," she said and started forward.

Smooth put his arm across her shoulders and helped her against the wind. A roll of the ship threw them against a lifeboat and sent Sonia to her knees. She scrambled up and shouted to Smooth. The force of the gale tore the words away and sent them into the night. He shook his head and pointed to a door leading to a passageway. Sonia tried the knob but could not pull the door against the pressure of the wind. Smooth waited for a lull and swung it open. They stepped inside and the door slammed shut behind them.

"This way," said Sonia. "The lower bridge is glassed."

She led Smooth along a passage and went through a doorway that opened onto the bridge. It was dark here save for the light that came from the binnacle. A quartermaster stood at the wheel turning the spokes slowly, trying to ease the bow into the giant waves that raced toward it. Two officers stood at the far end of the bridge looking out into the night. Another was nearby and he turned angrily toward Sonia and Smooth.

"You'll have to go below," he said shortly. "We're running into a hurricane."

"I think Captain Sutherland will let us stay," said Sonia.

The captain was standing near the quartermaster. He turned and stared through the darkness and then he came toward them.

"We'll be in the thick of it any mo-

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ment," he said quietly. "I think you would be more comfortable in your cabin, Miss Clonet."

"Please let us stay," said Sonia. "We won't talk or get in the way."

"But—"

"After all," she laughed, "this is my hurricane. I've always wanted to see one and I think this was made to order."

"Very well," said Captain Sutherland. "Stand back out of the way and brace yourself against a handrail."

"Oh, thank you, Captain," said Sonia. She turned toward Smooth. "Now—aren't you glad you came with me?"

"You told the captain you wouldn't talk," said Smooth. "Shut up and get over on that corner."

Captain Sutherland grinned. "I'll leave her to you, Mr. Kyle. I'm sure you will take care of her."

THE storm was making quickly. It was tearing sheets of frothing water from the wave tops and hurling them against the glass windows of the bridge. Dark night had closed in all about. The stars were gone and when Smooth looked aft he saw the red of the port light gleaming at him like a fevered eye.

Sonia's fingers were clenched tightly upon his arm. She swayed with him to the motion of the ship. At times he heard her speak to him but he did not answer. The power of the storm held him. He saw a towering sea lift the *Princess Nola* as though she were a paper ship fashioned by a child. There was a thunder of steel plates against racing water when the bow went down. The sea climbed the rail, hung as a menacing fist above the forward deck and swept inboard. A boom tore free from its cradle. It swung like a giant arm, ripping and tearing the deck gear away. An officer called and pointed. Captain Sutherland nodded his head.

Smooth thought this must be the father of all hurricanes. The wind was a solid thing that lifted the ship and tossed it as a child might play with a ball. The sea was in revolt. It gathered its waves into marching armies that hurried first in one way, then in another. The *Princess Nola* was swept along. The helmsman fought the wheel —left, now right, left again. He looked toward the captain and there was doubt in his eyes.

"Easy does it," said Captain Sutherland quietly. "The *Princess* will take us through."

A lifeboat cover ripped clear of its lashings. It leaped into the sky like a huge white bird. A climbing wave poured into the boat, filled it, crumpled its metal sides and slipped back to join the boiling ocean. Forward, Smooth saw the boatswain and four of the crew heading toward the swinging boom. The men held fast to the gear, releasing one handhold only when they had secured another. Smooth watched the boatswain brace himself against a winch. A coil of rope snaked toward the boom and a sailor followed it. He caught the free end and took a few hasty turns about a cleat. The bow lifted and the boom swung hard over. It snapped the heavy line as though it were a silken thread.

"Axes!" cried Captain Sutherland. "Cut that boom away!"

He had opened a door that led to the flying bridge and the scream of the gale drowned his voice. But the boatswain needed no orders. Smooth saw an axe flash in the gleam of a cargo light. The boatswain was cutting at the boom close up to the mast.

"There's a real man," said Smooth.

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"You mean the sailor?" asked Sonia.

"Yes."

A wave rolled the ship hard over. The boom lifted and fell. The iron block at its tip battered against the hatch covers. It ripped the heavy tarpaulin. Wind spun beneath the brown canvas. There was a tearing sound that was loud above the storm. The tarpaulin bellied, whipped free and spun flapping into the night. Again the boom lifted and hammered against the hatch. Captain Sutherland was on the flying bridge now—watching, shading his eyes with a crooked arm against the force of the wind. Smooth followed him.

An officer pushed him aside and shouted into the captain's ear. Smooth could not hear the words but he knew what the officer had said. The boom was splintering the heavy hatch-covers, tearing them as though they were matchwood rather than seasoned timber. Water flooded into the hold. Each wave that roared across the forward deck found its way into the breach.

"What happened?" cried Sonia.

She was at Smooth's side. Her slim figure was slanted into the wind and her hair streamed away from her head like a waving dark flag.

"Get below!" yelled Smooth. "This isn't fun any more!"

"No!" she cried.

SMOOTH turned away. He saw the captain coming toward them and there was a far-away look in the seaman's eyes. He gripped the rail and braced himself. He leaned toward Smooth and cupped a hand to his mouth.

"I want to speak with Sonia," he said. "Just a few words—alone."

Smooth nodded and stepped farther along the bridge. He saw Captain Sutherland put an arm about Sonia's shoulders and hold her face close to his while he talked. The fury of the storm drowned their speech. But Sonia was laughing, shaking her head in negation and leaning close to the captain. The glow from the forward cargo lights touched her face and brought it into sharp relief against the night. Smooth thought of the Valkyries—the storm maidens who rode the wind. He saw the captain lift the white face to his own. Smooth looked away. A thousand thoughts twisted in his mind. Why? Why was Captain Sutherland kissing this white-faced woman? What was happening there on the bridge? What was being said? He saw the captain's hand before him. He grasped it without knowing quite what he was doing. Then he saw the captain clambering down a ladder that led to the forward deck.

"Stop him!" cried Sonia. "Smooth—don't let him go!"

"Why?"

"No—he mustn't—"

Smooth started toward the ladder but an officer barred the way. The man's face was hard and there was bewilderment in his eyes. Smooth watched the captain fighting the wind as he crossed to the mast. The boatswain and the men of the crew were clinging to a stay. Mountains of water leaped out of he night and dashed against them. Smooth saw a twisting wave hit the captain and throw him to the deck. For an instant Smooth thought he was gone. Then he saw that gray head lift from the smother. The captain's cap was gone. His oilskins were torn and lashing in the wind. He staggered forward and took the axe from the boatswain's hand. Smooth saw the blade bite deep into the boom. Again and again it lifted and fell. The men of the crew clung to

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their handholds and watched. The *Princess Nola* rolled as though she would cover her beam end. An acre of ocean swept across the deck. Captain Sutherland crouched and gripped a line.

"He can't make it," cried Smooth. "He'll be carried away!"

But again the axe was lifting and falling. Each blow ripped out a heavy chip. The boom swung with the motion of the ship. But always the captain moved with it. Then Smooth saw the axe whirl into the sea as the captain stepped clear. A roll of the ship started the boom in a lurching swing. It snapped, broke free and leaped across the deck. Another roll sent it tearing through the rail and into the blackness. Captain Sutherland was directing the men. Smooth saw dark figures struggling with a rolled tarpaulin. They slid it across the shattered hatch. Each wave threatened to carry them into the sea. But they held on, crouching, fighting, struggling for holds. In front of them was the captain. At times Smooth heard his voice lifted in command. Wherever there was a danger point, there was Captain Sutherland.

Smooth turned from the fight below him to look at Sonia. Her hands were fastened about the rail. Her eyes were on the captain, watching, following each move.

"And that's the man you pretended to love," said Smooth slowly. A lull in the storm made way for her voice. "Look at him, Sonia. Look at him—and think of the slimy bunch you've hooked up with."

"Don't, Smooth," she said. "If you'd heard what he said—if you'd—"

"Keep it!" snapped Smooth.

He turned to look at the forward deck. Two officers were fighting their way toward the captain. Smooth saw his arm lift and point to the bridge.

"Get back!"

The captain's voice came through the night like the snap of a breaking spar. The officers hesitated. One lifted his arms as though in protest. The captain stared at him. There was a moment of hesitation and the officer turned. Both men battled their way back to the bridge. Captain Sutherland was left with the boatswain and the crew.

The tarpaulin was spread. Each lift of the bow gave the men an instant in which to draw it farther across the ragged edges of the hatch boards. Others of the crew were battening it down—wedging it tightly in place at the hatch combings. And always the captain was at their shoulders—directing, showing the way, calling a warning when a wave raced across the deck. Soon it was over and Smooth saw the captain ordering the men below. They climbed past the tangled gear and made the forecastle. Captain Sutherland looked toward the bridge and waved.

Smooth saw him walking upright across the hatch. The *Princess Nola* buried her nose in a black hill. A seething Niagara leaped across the bow. It swept aft, hissing and frothing like a river gone mad. It struck the captain and lifted him in its arms. For an instant Smooth saw a gray head that turned toward the bridge. Then the forward deck was empty. Captain Sutherland had gone down to the sea for the last time.

As though appeased by a worthy sacrifice, the gods of the storm drew back. The wind slackened and the *Princess Nola* gained headway. Smooth turned from the night and looked at Sonia. She was rigid. Tense against the rail, her eyes wide in horror.

"Smooth—!"

"You murderess," said Smooth, and walked from the bridge.

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CHAPTER VII

A HACK IN HAVANA

IT WAS not until the gray walls of Morro Castle lifted against a Cuban sky that Smooth saw Sonia again. The *Princess Nola* had taken the pilot aboard and was steaming toward her dock. Smooth was seated in a deck chair watching the small fishing boats scattered about the harbor. Off the starboard bow was Havana. The city crowded the waterfront and from where he sat Smooth could see the tall buildings and wide plazas of the business district. He was wondering what luck he would have in those tree-lined streets when Sonia stepped from a passageway and walked to the rail. For a time she stared at the city. Then, as though drawn by the steadiness of Smooth's gaze, she turned and caught him watching her. One hand lifted to her mouth and she backed along the rail. Then she crossed to a passageway and was gone.

Smooth grinned and climbed out of the chair. He walked to his cabin and found Tibbs getting the luggage in order. As he stood watching the man Smooth caught an odor of tobacco. He realized it was always present when the steward was in the room. Good tobacco. Tibbs was evidently a heavy smoker. And he was particular about his choice of cigars. Probably the best that Cuba could produce. Smooth was a cigarette smoker but he knew and appreciated the rich, full flavor of good leaf. And it was like Tibbs, he thought, to be particular about cigars. The little Englishman was immaculate and extremely fastidious. His uniforms were always spotless. His hands were clean and the nails trimmed. Smooth had long since classed him as the perfect steward. A rare creature—Smooth smiled.

"How soon do we dock?" asked Smooth.

"In about a half hour, sir," said Tibbs. "It doesn't take very long."

"Thanks."

"Have you been to Cuba before, sir?"

"Never. This is the first trip."

"Beautiful place, Cuba," said Tibbs. "I have a home here, sir."

"Have you?" said Smooth. "When do you get a chance to live in it?"

Tibbs laughed. "Not very often. But at times I get a leave of absence. I'm getting one on this trip."

"Good for you."

"Perhaps I could take you about the island," suggested Tibbs. "If you wish, I'll be only too glad to show you what I know of Havana."

"Not a bad idea," agreed Smooth.

"It will only take one evening to see most of the places."

"What places?"

"The usual places, sir," said Tibbs. "The places where all American tourists like to go."

"Nuts!" said Smooth. "What I want to see is the places the tourists *don't* go."

"Of course, sir. That's what they all say."

Smooth seated himself near the door and grinned at Tibbs. The steward was a little man—not more than five feet and narrow across the shoulders. His face was well made and he affected a closely-cropped mustache. Smooth decided the man had been working at his trade for a good many years.

"About forty-five, aren't you, Tibbs?" he said.

"Exactly, sir."

"Married?"

"No, sir," said Tibbs and ducked his head as he chuckled. "Never had time, sir."

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Smooth thought it might be a good idea to have someone like Tibbs show him the city. At least it would give him an idea of the general layout of the place and Smooth knew this would be necessary. But once he was established in Havana, Smooth had very definite ideas as to how he would obtain any stray information that might be useful. Having spent a good many years on a taxi in New York, Smooth knew the average hackman could tell a man more about a city in five minutes than anyone else could in a month.

HE DIDN'T think the taxi drivers of Havana were very much different from those of any other big city. They knew how to make a fast dollar. They would clip a chump if the opportunity arose. And they were no more honest nor crooked than the men of any other trade. But they knew their town—knew it from long hours spent cruising through dark streets in search of money with which to live. They were smart. They had to be smart or they were soon forced from the streets. Driving a hack wasn't a fool's racket in any town. And Smooth liked to deal with smart people.

He lit a cigarette and offered one to the steward. Tibbs declined and went on with the business of arranging Smooth's bags. Never at any time had Tibbs allowed himself to overstep the line that was drawn between passenger and steward. If he was at all surprised at Smooth's easy acceptance of him as an equal, he never showed it by the flick of an eyelash.

"What's the name of a good hotel?" asked Smooth.

"You might try the Sevilla, sir," said Tibbs. "It's in the heart of town—right on the Prado. But if you prefer to be where it is cooler—"

"In town," said Smooth. "I don't mind the heat."

"The Sevilla is a modern hotel. The upper floors are quite cool at any time. And everyone speaks English perfectly there."

"Great," said Smooth. "It's the Sevilla for me."

"Er—do you speak any Spanish, sir?" asked Tibbs.

"Oh, I mumble a few words of it. But not enough to count."

"I thought perhaps you might," said Tibbs. "Miss Clonet speaks it perfectly."

"Is that so?" said Smooth. "Have you seen her for the past day or so?"

"She hasn't been well, sir," said Tibbs. "She's been confined to her cabin. But I'm sure she will be quite all right when she gets home."

"How much do you know about Miss Clonet," asked Smooth.

"Nothing, sir," said Tibbs a trifle stiffly. "Except that she is a perfect lady and a very generous tipper."

"I catch on," laughed Smooth. "But don't worry—you'll be taken care of."

"I didn't mention it for any reason."

"Of course not," grinned Smooth. "But suppose we make a date for Saturday evening. You stop off at the hotel and we'll have a look at Havana. Make it about eight-thirty."

"Very well, sir," said Tibbs. "I'll be there. And if you'll excuse me, I must get these bags forward."

Smooth nodded as the telephone bell in the cabin rang. He lifted the instrument and waved dismissal to Tibbs who was standing in the doorway.

"Hello," he said. "Kyle speaking."

"This is Sonia," said the voice on the phone. "Will you please stop in at my cabin for a moment?"

"All right, Sonia," said Smooth. "Soon as I cable I'll be with you."

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Smooth hung up and turned toward the door. Tibbs was still there and the steward was looking inquiringly toward Smooth.

"What is it?" asked Smooth.

"I forgot to tell you," said Tibbs, "that it is wise to have someone along who knows about such things when you make any purchases in Havana. I'll be glad to direct you to the most reasonable shops."

"So you get your commission," said Smooth wisely. "I know all about it, Tibbs."

"I merely wanted to help, sir."

Smooth patted him on the back and followed him out on the deck. Tibbs went on with his work and Smooth hurried to the radio room. Here he sent a message to the District Supervisor in New York and said little progress had been made but he was confident things would break in Havana. He gave his address as the Hotel Sevilla and asked the operator to hurry the message through.

When he knocked on the door of Sonia's cabin he wondered just why she wished to see him. His remarks during the storm when Captain Sutherland had been swept over the side had been crude and to the point. At the time he had forgotten it might be well to keep on good terms with this girl who was a part of the crowd he expected to convict. Nothing mattered but that he had seen a brave man put an end to a life that was no longer worth living.

SMOOTH heard Sonia tell him to come in. He opened the door. Sonia's bags were packed and she was dressed to go ashore. She motioned Smooth to a chair and seated herself near him.

"I wanted to say goodbye," she said slowly. "We won't meet again, Smooth."

"That's what you think," laughed Smooth. "Gorgeous—you'll be surprised how often I turn up."

"We won't meet," she insisted.

"Why not?"

"Because I'm getting out of the racket."

"Stop kidding."

"I mean it," she said. "It's too tough for me, Smooth. Murder isn't in my line."

"You'll get used to it," said Smooth. "They all do."

"I don't blame you for thinking that of me. After this trip—and Captain Sutherland . . ."

"Listen, Gorgeous—what I think of you doesn't make much difference. You're in one racket, and I'm in another. As long as you stay in yours, I'll try to trip you and bounce you into jail. Outside of that, you're just another dame. Get it?"

"But I tell you I'm quitting," she protested. "Won't you believe me?"

"I might," said Smooth. "All you've got to do is say the right things and I'll be only too glad to believe you."

"You mean—tell you what I know of the mob?"

"Naturally."

"I can't do that, Smooth."

"Why not?"

"You know as well as I do. I wouldn't be alive an hour after I told you."

"Baloney!" said Smooth. "Once that mob is tossed into a jail they're not going to get out. And if I give you my word—"

The phone rang and Sonia hurried to answer it. She gave her name and listened silently for a moment. Then she hung up without making an answer. When she took her place near Smooth

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again her face was drawn. It seemed that years had suddenly come and deepened her eyes. Her lips were tight and her fingers shook when she fumbled for a cigarette.

Smooth sat quietly and studied her face. He reached for his own cigarettes and offered one to her. She put it between her lips and leaned toward the match he held. The cigarette wavered about in the flame. Smooth leaned back, tossed the match into a tray and waited.

"This is goodbye, Smooth," she said.

"You said that before."

"I mean it. We're not going to see each other again."

"Who scared you?"

"What?"

"You know what I'm talking about," said Smooth. "Who told you to keep your mouth shut. Who was on the phone?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"I understand," said Smooth. "You'd rather take the word of one of the boys in the mob than mine. That it?"

"I've got to. I—I know what they can do."

Smooth's laugh was short. "Stick around, Gorgeous. When the boys get tough in Havana, maybe you'll see what Smooth Kyle can do."

He stood up and started toward the door. Sonia left her chair and crossed to him quickly. Her hand was on his arm and she held it tightly.

"Be smart, Smooth," she whispered. "When the *Princess Nola* leaves for New York—go with her. Don't stay in Cuba."

"Thanks for the advice," said Smooth. "But maybe I'll be healthier if I don't take any from you, Sonia."

"Oh, I know you don't trust me. I don't blame you. But—"

"Where are you stopping in Havana?"

Sonia looked at him. "At the Hotel Sevilla."

"I thought you had a home in Havana?"

"I have. But I'm not going there for a few days."

"Then we'll be seeing each other often."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I'm going to stay at the Sevilla."

"I understand," she said quietly and took her hand from his arm. "If you won't take my advice, well—goodbye."

SMOOTH shrugged and left the cabin. He walked forward to where a group of sailors were flaking down the lines that would be used when the ship docked. In the group he saw Pedro Blanco. The deck hand turned his back and appeared to be very busy with his work when Smooth crossed to him.

"Remember me, Pedro?" said Smooth quietly. "I'm the guy you tried to kill."

"An accident, *señor*," said Pedro without looking at Smooth. "The officers have said it was an accident."

"But we know better," laughed Smooth. "Don't we, Pedro?"

"The *señor* is joking."

"No," said Smooth. "The *señor* is just telling you that if you try any more accidents he'll put a slug between your eyes. And I notice you've got a burn on your neck. Pretty close, wasn't it, Pedro?"

"A rope burn. I got it during the storm."

"Before the storm," corrected Smooth.

"I do not understand."

Smooth grinned and walked away. He wasn't particularly worried about Pedro. The man had been hired to do a job and had failed. Pedro might not

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know what was awaiting him in Cuba. But Smooth had a pretty good idea Pedro would have little chance to tell his experience to any of his friends. One of Rod Martell's crowd would see to that.

There was the usual excitement that comes at landing time. Passengers hurried about the decks taking addresses and saying goodbyes. Some lined the rails and waved to friends who had come to meet them at the dock. Stewards went about their duties quickly and efficiently. And slowly the *Princess Nola* rubbed against the pier. Lines went out and the stevedores swarmed aboard.

Smooth walked to his cabin and glanced about to see if Tibbs had collected all his belongings. Everything was gone and Smooth joined the crowd at the companionway. He went along the dock to the room where Cuban customs officers were examining the baggage. His grips received a cursory examination and Smooth stepped aside to watch the officials at work. Little pretense was made at thoroughness. In fact, some of the luggage was not opened at all before a sticker was affixed to it and it was hurried along to the waiting porters.

Tibbs had handed Smooth's bags to a porter and now stood respectfully to one side waiting. Smooth tossed him a few bills and reminded him of his appointment for the following Saturday night.

"I'll be there, sir," said Tibbs. "I'm very exact about those things."

"I hope you are," said Smooth. "At least, I hope you're not quite so careless as these fellows."

"You mean the Customs Guards?"

"Yes. A fellow could bring just about anything he wanted to into this country. No trouble at all."

"But who would want to smuggle anything into Cuba?" asked Tibbs.

"You've got me there, Tibbs," laughed Smooth. "Who would?"

"Blessed if I know, sir."

"That makes us even. Goodbye and be careful."

HE FOLLOWED the porter to a line of taxis stationed at the dock. They were light touring cars, neatly painted, polished and well cared for. The drivers were typical hackmen. They stood near their cars and sized up the ship's passengers with appraising eyes. Some were neat. Some were sloppy. All were stamped with that look of weary knowledge that comes to men in a hard trade.

Smooth's porter headed toward a car at the front of the line. The driver was old, smoked a pipe and wore his peaked cap squarely on the top of his head. Smooth caught his porter's arm.

"Not that one," he said. "Take the third cab in the line."

The porter shrugged and tossed the bags into the back of the car. The driver of the third car looked at Smooth in surprise, tucked a New York newspaper into his pocket and waited for instructions. Smooth paid off the porter and turned to the driver. He was of about the same build as Smooth. Both had that indefinable ease of motion that tells of hidden strength. When they grinned there was the same quick lift to the corners of the mouth—a flash of a smile that was gone almost before it had started. But for the fact that the driver was a decided Latin, he might have been another Smooth Kyle that had drifted to Cuba and taken up his trade on a cab.

"The Sevilla," said Smooth.

"*Si, señor,*" answered the driver and pulled away from the dock.

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They hurried through Avenida De Belgica, swung past the Capitol and joined the cars rolling north on the Prado. Smooth glanced idly at the slow-moving crowds on the streets, grinned in approval at the groups seated under awnings at sidewalk cafes and decided he would spend as much time as possible in the shade. When the car stopped at the hotel entrance he pulled a few coins from his pocket and looked at the driver questioningly.

"Dos pesos," said the driver.

Smooth pretended not to hear. The Cuban peso was equal to an American dollar and Smooth knew they had come less than a mile from the docks. Two dollars was about the amount Smooth would have tried to collect from a tourist for this trip in the old days on a hack. It was part of the trade to get as much as possible and a tourist was always fair game.

The hotel doorman was taking the luggage from the car and Smooth stepped out onto the sidewalk. He grinned and looked at the hackman again.

"Quanto es?" he said quickly.

Disappointment came to the hackman's face. He stared at Smooth for a moment and slowly an answering grin touched the corners of his mouth. It was unusual for a tourist to speak the language. It meant a fair price must be asked.

"Cinquenta centavos," he said.

"That's better," said Smooth. "Fifty cents should be about right."

He handed the driver a half dollar and watched the expression on the man's face. It was sour. Then Smooth dipped into his pocket and took out two dollars.

"Here's a tip," he said and passed them to the driver.

"Muchas gracias, señor."

"You're welcome. And now—do you speak English?"

"Un poco de. Si lo comprendo mejor que lo hablo."

Smooth remembered enough of his Spanish to know the driver had agreed he could speak a little English. He had also said he could understand it better than he could speak it. Smooth pointed to the New York newspaper in the hackman's pocket.

"Stop stalling," he grinned. "You speak the language as well as I do."

"Sure I do," said the driver. "But I wanted to see if you spoke Spanish, or if those two words were just an accident."

"Fair enough," said Smooth. "I think we're going to get along great."

"Why not?" said the driver. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Plenty," said Smooth. "But first tell me your name."

"Gerardo Portela."

"Glad to know you, Gerry. My name is Kyle. Come back in about a half hour and we'll have a look at the town."

CHAPTER VIII

"THE BOSS . . .?"

SMOOTH followed a bellboy to the desk in the lobby of the Sevilla. A clerk who spoke perfect English assigned him to a room on the seventh floor, explaining that the breeze from the harbor would keep it cool at all times. Smooth crossed a beautifully-tiled patio, stepped into a slow-moving elevator and soon found himself in a room that was typical of those used in warm climates. The ceiling was high and the windows were double the length of those in cooler countries. The floor was tiled and the walls were painted in a pleasing cool pastel shade. When the bellboy had left Smooth called the valet

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and told him to pick up some light clothes that needed pressing. Then he walked to the window and looked out over the city.

Wide avenues led back from the waterfront and were intersected by narrow streets that seemed to run in a dozen directions and end nowhere. The hum of traffic came dimly to his ears and when he looked down there seemed to be little or no movement. On the nearby rooftops he saw women hanging out clothes, scrubbing at stone tubs or sitting in groups in the shade of a wall. On the next street the roof of a large market place had been converted into a makeshift farmyard. Corrugated iron plates were fashioned into a rude fence that housed a half-dozen crowing roosters. A few hens scampered madly about and stole scraps from a rabbit pen. And near a door that led into a rudely-built house was a black goat.

Smooth changed his clothes, washed and glanced at a map of Havana that was on the dresser. The business section of the city was laid out in the form of an irregular wheel with the Capitol as its hub. He found the Avenida de los Alcaldes where Sonia Clonet's home was situated. It was a wide avenue in what was evidently the better residential section. Next, he looked in the phone book and learned the number of the house. Smooth decided it might be worth while to drive there. He locked his room door and took the elevator to the lobby. When he stepped into the street the doorman motioned to a cab but Smooth waved it away. He saw Gerry Portela's car farther along the street and crossed to it.

"'Lo, Gerry," he said. "How about rolling out to the Avenida de los Alcaldes?"

"Glad to," said Gerry. "Climb in."

"Suppose you and I get organized quickly," said Smooth as the car rolled through traffic. "Just to keep you from getting any screwy ideas, it might help if I told you I shoved one of these hacks in New York."

"I was afraid of that."

"Don't let it throw you. I pay for service when I get it."

"Why are you in Cuba? A vacation?"

"Let's call it that. But from now on, I'll ask the questions."

"I catch on," grinned Gerry.

"Smart boy," said Smooth. "And the first thing I'd like to know is a little something about the police in this town. Are they really cops, or are they a joke?"

"Don't get any wrong ideas about those fellows," said Gerry quickly. "Batista started a new setup in this country. They're really cops. And tough ones. We haven't had a stickup in Havana in months. And there wasn't a trial when they caught the guys who pulled the last one."

"Why not?"

"They couldn't talk when the police brought them in."

"No? How's that?"

"They were dead," said Gerry.

"I think I understand," said Smooth. "But you seem to talk my language pretty well. Ever been to New York."

"Sure. Spent five years there as a waiter in a night club."

"That makes it perfect."

THE car swung slowly along the Malecon and headed toward Avenida Wilson. Smooth thought it was a happy chance that had hooked him up with this driver. He was a man who knew his way around, would not ask too many questions, and knew the answers to any Smooth might ask. At times he pointed to a landmark or

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some interesting place along the way. He explained the layout of the streets and showed Smooth the many improvements being affected by the new regime. His conversation was casual but careful. It was obvious he knew Smooth was more than a tourist. He might be guessing what mission had brought this wise-eyed New Yorker to Cuba but he had sense enough not to ask. When the car swung into Avenida de los Alcaldes he stopped and turned to Smooth.

"Here's the street," he said. "What number do you want?"

"It's in the hundreds. Just cruise along and I'll tell you when to stop."

Gerry turned left and rolled toward Monserrat. Smooth looked at the houses that lined the street and decided the owners must be fairly well-to-do people.

At length he saw a small house set back from the road. It was nicely-kept and carried the number he had found in the 'phone book. The windows were open but the blinds were drawn against the heat of the afternoon sun. Smooth thought the house had the appearance of a place where people were living. It didn't look like a house that has been closed and left to stand empty. He tapped Gerry's shoulder and told him to stop.

"I'll be back in a minute," he said and started toward the house.

There was an ornate knocker on the door and Smooth rapped hard. For a time there was no answer and he rapped again. He heard voices within and soon the door swung open. A middle-aged woman—evidently a servant—looked at Smooth and spoke rapidly in Spanish.

"Señora Clonet?" asked Smooth.

There was another stream of rapid Spanish and Smooth wished he had a little more knowledge of the tongue. He smiled and shook his head. The woman turned and called. A tall, well-dressed man came across the hall. Smooth judged him to be about thirty-five years of age. His hair was dark and carefully brushed. His eyes were dark brown and there was a small mustache that lined a rather short upper lip. He bowed slightly and opened the door wider.

"Is there anything I can do for you, sir?" he asked.

"I'm looking for Miss Clonet," said Smooth. "Is she at home?"

"Not just now. Is there any message?"

"No—no message. Mr. Martell asked me to get in touch with her."

"Oh—Mr. Martell," said the man quickly. "Your name is—?"

"Cameron," said Smooth.

"Won't you come in? My name is Falero—Emilio Falero. Mr. Martell must have told you about me."

"A little," said Smooth.

He walked across the wide hall to a beautifully-furnished sitting room. The light that filtered through the slatted wooden shutters held the room in a semi-gloom that was cool and restful after the glare of the sun. Falero motioned Smooth to a chair and spoke a few hurried words to the servant. She left and Smooth again wished his knowledge of Spanish were better. He had not caught what Falero said. And in the next few moments Smooth knew he would need every advantage possible to keep up the pretense he had started.

He was inwardly amused at the success of this idea that had come to him on the spur of the moment. When he lifted the knocker there had been no thought in his mind as to what he would do or say when the door was opened.

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"When do you expect Miss Clonet?" he asked.

"In a day or two," said Falero. "She arrived in town today."

"Yes. I know that," said Smooth quickly. "Martell cabled me she would be here today. That's why I came."

"But she was delayed. There was some work for her to do in town."

"You mean—about Kyle?"

"You know of him?"

"Of course," said Smooth. "But I understood he was to be—er—taken care of on the ship."

Falero studied Smooth for a moment. "I'm afraid I do not understand you."

SMOOTH knew the man was puzzled. Undoubtedly Martell's crowd was not a large one. A dozen men could handle a great many diamonds. And Martell was smart. He knew a bulky organization was dangerous. When too many men are taken into a deal there is apt to be one who is careless with his tongue. But because of the scope of this diamond-smuggling venture, the organization could not at all times be in close contact. Smooth realized Falero was one of the lesser members. If he had been one of the leaders his attitude would have been one of instant distrust. But Falero was a little man. And like all little men he pretended to a greater knowledge than was really his. Instead of immediately checking against Smooth with a hasty phone call to a superior, Falero was enjoying a moment of importance. And Smooth intended to use this.

"Surely, you must have heard of this man Kyle," he said easily. "The orders went out to get rid of him weeks ago. We thought you fellows here in Cuba knew about it."

"We did," said Falero. "But we also knew it must appear to be an accident."

"Naturally. He was to be lost at sea."

"Yes."

"Then why wasn't it attended to?"

"Sonia tried and so did the boss. It simply couldn't be done."

"The boss?" said Smooth quickly. "Was he in on it?"

Falero laughed. "Does he ever miss anything?"

Smooth had no answer for this. Whoever Falero called "the boss" had been aboard the *Princess Nola*. Smooth knew it was not the sailor who had tried to kill him. But he could think of no one else that would fit the name. It wouldn't be wise to ask too many questions of Falero. Better to pretend to a knowledge that was not his in the hope of learning more.

"No. He doesn't miss much," agreed Smooth. "And I suppose he will help Sonia finish the job here in Havana."

"I think so."

"In that case, the shipments should go through as usual."

"I see no reason why they shouldn't."

"And the next is—?"

"The regular sailing."

Smooth had drawn a blank. A single word would have given him some invaluable information. If he knew when diamonds were to be shipped to America a single line to the Treasury Department would have put a group of searchers to work. With a thoroughness that had no equal, they would have searched until the stones were located. Convictions and jail sentences would follow. But Falero had spoiled that.

When the servant returned she carried a tray on which were two small cups filled with black coffee. She offered one to Smooth and the other to Falero. Smooth lifted the coffee to his lips and sipped. He saw Falero watching him above the rim of his cup. Caution was

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in the Cuban's eyes as well as an eagerness to learn anything Smooth could tell him.

"You are new in the organization, Mr. Cameron?" he asked.

"Yes," said Smooth. "But I've worked with Rod before. We made a good deal of money together in Europe."

"But not like you are making it now," laughed Falero.

"No. It wasn't so easy. But we didn't have so many people to pay off and that helped." He set down the cup and looked indolently at the ceiling. "How many of you are working out of Havana now?"

"Only three of us," said Falero. "Sometimes we hire a man for an odd job. But not often."

"Did you hire Pedro Blanco—the deck hand on the ship?"

Falero licked his lips.

"How did you know about that?"

Smooth realized he had overstepped. It had been a casual question but not a clever one. Now he would have to cover his mistake.

"You'd be surprised how much I know," he laughed. "When Sonia comes home she'll tell you how I know these things."

"But I don't understand," protested Falero. "Only the boss knew I had hired Blanco. No one else."

"No one else but me," corrected Smooth.

Falero was on his feet now. He paced the length of the room a few times and stopped near Smooth.

"When did you land in Havana?" he asked.

"Not long ago. I came by plane."

"Oh, I see!" There was relief in Falero's voice. "You came from Miami -from our place in Coral Gables?"

"That's right," said Smooth.

IF FALERO wanted to ask and answer his own questions, it was all right with Smooth. The more the man talked, the more Smooth would learn. By a careless remark Falero had told him the mob was also working through Miami. That they had a place in Coral Gables.

"Who is in charge of the place at Coral Gables now?" asked Falero.

His question seemed casual but his eyes were steady on Smooth as he asked it. And Smooth realized he had been led into a difficult situation. If he had just left Coral Gables he should certainly know who was in charge. If he did not give the right name, Falero would realize Smooth had tricked him; something would happen—Smooth didn't know, nor care particularly, what it would be. A fight, perhaps. But whatever it was would effectively end Falero as a source of information. Smooth searched his memory and recalled a name he had heard Martell mention to Sonia when he had visited her cabin in New York.

"Murchison," he said. "He's a good man, too."

"Murchison in Coral Gables?" said Falero. "I thought he was in Antwerp."

"You thought wrong," said Smooth

And so had Smooth. He realized that no sooner than the words were out Falero's suspicions had been aroused and the man was on guard. Smooth realized he would learn no more from him and decided it was time to go. He stood up, bowed to Falero and started toward the door.

"I'd like to stay and chat with you," he said easily, "but I've a dozen things to do. When Sonia arrives, ask her to call me at my hotel."

"Which hotel?"

"She'll know," said Smooth and opened the front door.

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Falero put out a hand as though to detain him but apparently thought better of it. He murmured a polite goodbye and stood watching Smooth as he headed toward the car.

"Let's go," said Smooth to Gerry. "Take me to Gonzales and Company. I think they're on the Prado."

"That's right," said Gerry. "Near the hotel."

They drove out of the residential section and entered one of the narrow streets of the town. The car skimmed past sidewalks no more than two feet in width and at times narrower. Pedestrians stepped into doorways to make way for the car when Gerry thumbed the horn button. When they drew near a particularly inviting cafe near the Capitol, Smooth asked Gerry to stop. The car was parked and they seated themselves at a small table. Gerry asked the waiter to bring him a bottle of beer and Smooth agreed it was a good idea. Gerry tilted his glass and drained it. He set it on the table and nodded his head toward the street.

"There's a fellow out there who's very interested in you, Mr. Kyle," he said. "He's been following us from Avenida de los Alcaldes. Know him?"

"Nice work, Gerry," said Smooth and turned toward the street. "When did you spot him?"

"A car picked us up a few minutes after you left the house. It parked near mine and this guy got out of it. See him?"

Smooth caught a glimpse of Falero in the crowd on the sidewalk. The man was walking slowly and watching Smooth. With him was a narrow-chested Cuban who smoked a long cigar. He was poorly dressed and wore a dirty straw hat. When Smooth looked at him he glanced away.

"The guy with the mustache is the one I was talking to in the house," said Smooth.

"He keeps bad company," said Gerry.

"Yes?"

"The fellow with him is a knife-thrower."

"Isn't that nice."

"Not when you're on the receiving end."

"I don't intend to be," said Smooth. "But if you'd rather not string along with me—"

"I've got nothing else to do," said Gerry. "Where do we go from here?"

"To Gonzales and Company—and don't spare the horses!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Ghoul Insurance

UNEASY lie the Gibson clan of Sutton, England. They sleep not in peace, nor ever will. One hundred forty-four times the light has desecrated the stygian Gibson tomb, one hundred forty-four times warders of the dead have stolen into the crypt and spied upon the dead. In 1777 the Gibsons, afraid of ghouls, set aside a trust fund to provide for a yearly inspection of their tomb. And, up to a month ago, the Gibson cadavers were all there, dead, moldering along nicely, ghoulless but ghoulish.

—*Chandler McGinnis.*

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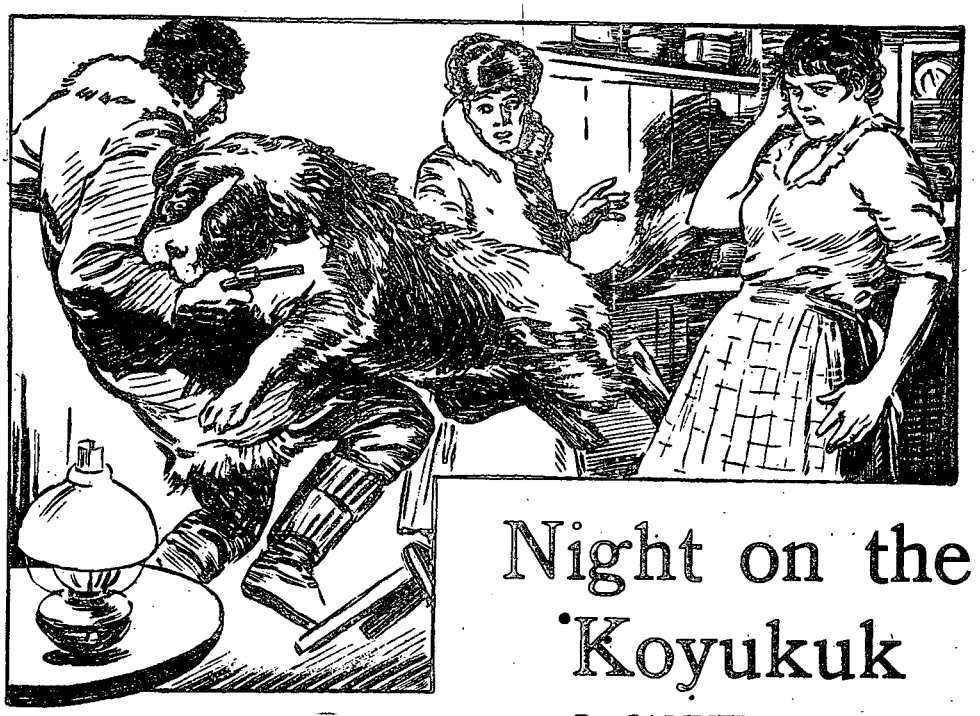

Night on the Koyukuk

By SAMUEL TAYLOR

Author of "Second Wind," "The High One," etc.

"BY JUDAS, I'll kill him!" Banty Tietjen's scrawny frame was shaking with impotent rage. "If he goes over the hill tonight, I'll kill him!"

At sound of the voice, Baldy gave throat to a rumbling whine. The St. Bernard padded across the dark cabin to where his master was hunched at the double-paned window, watching the other cabin which sat deep in the powdery snow forty yards away.

The dog's warm tongue on his hand seemed to ease Banty Tietjen's twitching face a bit. Baldy had helped pull him through the long winter—Baldy, and a hatred for the Big One. Hatred gave an acid strength to wizened Banty Tietjen, so that day by day as he and the Big One worked their claim together—never speaking, never acknowledging each other's presence as they tended boiler, drove home the steam points, mucked out the thawed gravel and panned it—that sustaining hate kept Banty Tietjen going and gave him endurance to match the Big One's power. The Big One knew Banty would die rather than lag behind one scoop of the shovel. The Big One was deliberately setting a killing pace.

But even the spur of hate was failing. Banty Tietjen's stringy muscles felt like strips of living pain over his shrieking bones. The Big One had worked like a demon today, all day without a rest, because of the shindig tonight down at Webster's roadhouse. The Big One wanted to take Mrs. Plym to that shindig; he had tried to wear Banty down so that the little man would be too tired to go. Watching across the forty yards of salt-like snow, Banty Tietjen could see the Big One moving back and forth across the range of the yellow window, fixing up.

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Banty Tietjen's shaking hand broke two matches against the sanded strip of the box before he got a light going and touched it to the wick of the bracket lamp. He washed with the bucket of thawed snow on the tin stove, changed from the denim to the caribou-hide parka. When the light went out of the Big One's window, Banty Tietjen was ready.

"He can't outlast me!" The little man's voice was almost a whimper. His snowshoes thumped hollowly on the plank flooring. "But if that big ox goes over the hill, I'll—I'll kill him, by Judas! . . . Come on, Baldy!"

THE Big One pushed his twelve-foot skis along easily through snow that was almost as fine as flour. Banty Tietjen padded alongside, his lean body swaying back and forth with the wide-spraddled snowshoe gait. A wise trail-dog, Baldy followed in the path packed by the webs. Neither man acknowledged the presence of the other. They hadn't spoken since before first snow flew.

The gulch made a twisting way, with a double line of thin willows marking the frozen creek. The powdery snow seemed to possess a luminous quality of its own that did not come from the flat stars. The left-hand slope was a barren white, the pitch on the right dotted black with scrub spruce. The Big One kept shoving those long skis over the soft snow covering the creek ice, and despite himself, Banty Tietjen couldn't keep abreast. He lagged a mere half yard or so, but he definitely was behind. He loosened the draw-string of his parka, and the bitter air seeped up from below. That kept him from sweating, but it didn't help his galloping heart nor put a spring in his raw muscles. The white breath-plumes of the Big One were coming fast, but he wasn't gasping. The Big One could keep on all night if necessary. He seemed as tireless and emotionless as a hulking Kodiak bear.

For perhaps two hours the silent race went on. Then the Big One swung through the right-hand fringe of willows and began chopping a herring-bone pattern up the steep pitch of the spruce-dotted wall of the gulch.

It was a heartless sort of pressure the Big One was applying. Two miles would take them down the gulch to the Koyukuk, around the fingering end of the ridge and back up the other ravine to Mrs. Plym's cabin. The Big One was taking the shortcut straight over the hill.

All the impotent hate against the Big One's strength seemed to come to a head. Banty Tietjen stopped, because rage was shaking his legs even more than fatigue. "He—he's doin' it—a-purpose!" he gasped. His breath was whistling from a burning throat. "He's goin' over the hill to run me down! By Judas, I'll kill him!"

FOR going on nine years, Banty Tietjen and the Big One had been partners on the Koyukuk. They'd run the mail up from Nulato for two seasons, and at one time or another prospected most of the tributaries of the river, including the ones indicated with vague dots on the best maps of Alaska. They'd Siwashed it on bitter trails—at one time had roared curses at each other for two long days when the only light was the occasional flare of the aurora, howled blistering epithets until voices were hoarse whispers—as the only way to keep each other awake when sleep meant death. Partners they were, for going onto nine years, until the blow-off over the Jack of Diamonds.

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A hundred petty irritations preceded the break. Men can't be together, bunking together, seeing nobody but each other for long months at a stretch, without the continual rubbing of personalities causing some heat from the friction. The way a man sucks through his teeth after a meal, or a habit of spitting on the floor or eating beans every morning for breakfast, may cause a festering little irritation that grows unacknowledged and unexpressed until it breaks open into an ugly sore of hate. Sourdoughs know there is no truer test of friendship than a winter together in a one-roomed cabin.

The partnership of Banty Tietjen and the Big One seemed due to last forever, however, because neither competed in the other's special province. Frail Banty was the smart one, and he did the cooking and kept the cabin up. The Big One did the muscle-work, most of it. Each was prone to praise the virtues of the other. And then they made a modest little strike and decided to sell their dog team, settle down and work the claim. But for sentimental reasons Banty wouldn't sell Baldy, the St. Bernard leader of the team.

The Big One growled about a fool dog eating its useless head off for nothing, and one day he essayed a kick at the brute. Luckily, the little man was on hand to stop the fight, or no telling who would have won. The incident put a tension in the air. The Big One grumbled about letting a dog in the cabin; he began growling about the cooking while Banty slaved over the stove as never did a woman trying to hold her husband. Then came the blow-off over the Jack of Diamonds.

Double solitaire helped pass the time after all the magazines had been read three times. Banty Tietjen, the brainy one, always won. The Big One would swear in a manner that showed he was mighty proud of Banty's ability. But after the friction over the dog, the Big One really put his heart into double solitaire. One night it seemed that he had a chance to win. He left the table to stick a chunk of wood in the tin stove, came back, and:

"Where'd that Jack of Diamonds come from?" he asked.

THE question was the same sort of thing as counting the cards or pulling a gun and yelling, "Cold deck!" The flare-up was brief but final.

The next morning the Big One began building himself a cabin forty yards away. Since September neither man had addressed the other, and hatred grew as it can grow in silence. The Big One had been whipped down in that last battle of words. He couldn't match repartee with Banty. He came back with his single weapon, strength. Banty Tietjen tried to compete. By using every labor-saving trick, by forcing himself to the limit, he'd held up his end. But his bolt was shot. He had nothing left for the trip to the shindig at Webster's roadhouse. And the Big One was making it harder, going over the hill to Mrs. Plym's.

Banty Tietjen, watching the lengthening pattern of the Big One's skis on the hillside, pulled off a mitten and fumbled up under the skirt of his parka for the revolver in the waistband of his caribou pants. He brought the weapon out. The cold air clouded the blued steel.

"Run me into the ground, will he!" he whined. "By Judas, I'll show the big ox!"

The spring of the single-action weapon was stiff. The click of the cocking hammer seemed fearfully loud.

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Snow flew in a silver cloud from the Big Man's chopping skis as he fish-boned up the slope. The black square of his torso made a target that would be easy to hit, even in starlight.

A throaty growl came from behind. Baldy growled again. The dog knew and hated guns. Baldy would attack a man with a gun, anybody but Banty Tietjen; the St. Bernard would even snarl at *him*.

The little man let the hammer gently off cock and fumblingly shoved the revolver back in his waistband. He rubbed his bare fingers together and the dog placed a frost-coated muzzle in the hand.

"You're right, Baldy. Even you would turn again' me fer a trick like that."

The little man began fighting his way up the slope, sobbing.

Snowshoes had the advantage over skis in a climb, but by brute strength the Big One held his lead; and on the other side, downhill, he would have all the advantage.

"Damn him and his muscles!" sobbed the little man. Then, at the crest, "Clumsy ox!" he snarled. But there was scant satisfaction in seeing the Big One take a header into the fine snow. Waddling down the slope on snowshoes, Banty Tietjen gained only a couple of rods before the Big One had untangled himself from the fall and was gliding again, with the skis throwing a filmy wake. The Big One reached Mrs. Plym's cabin a hundred yards in the lead, unstrapped his skis and knocked.

THE shot sounded even louder than the blood roaring in Banty Tietjen's ears. He saw the Big One floundering through the snow away from the cabin, heard the amazed explosion of the yell. Then there was a yellow oblong of light as the door opened, with Mrs. Plym making a black silhouette.

"Is that *you?* Oh, I'm so sorry!" she called. "I'm so upset. I forgot you boys were coming. Since I got the letter I've thought of nothing else. I've been expecting my—I've been expecting Mr. Plym. I was so nervous. When you knocked I shot high through the door, thinking it was he. . . . Won't you both come in? I'm awfully sorry. I really am. But I've been so nervous since I got the letter from my hus—from Mr. Plym. He's such a wild one. Such a temper . . ."

When the two men were inside, sitting stiffly on opposite sides of the cabin, Mrs. Plym continued: "I forgot about the shindig. And I guess I'd better not go. I've got to be here—I've got to be ready, when he comes. You boys go ahead. I've got to be here when he comes."

"Maybe I'd better stay awhile," Banty Tietjen suggested. "Maybe havin' a man around would help."

"You do need a man. A *man,*" rumbled the Big One, putting a world of scorn into the word.

"I'm baking biscuits," the woman said. "You boys rest a spell and have some biscuits, and then go on to the shindig down at Webster's. If you was here when he come, there might be a fuss. I can handle him. I told him for the last time I was through. This time I won't even talk to him. But you'll stay for a biscuit, won't you?"

The men nodded. From Nome to Fort Yukon, from Anchorage to Point Barrow, the chances are that in any gathering of three or more sourdoughs the talk will at some time or another during a long evening touch upon the subject of Mrs. Plym's biscuits.

Nowhere in the world, perhaps, is

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the fine art of cooking a respectable subject for masculine discourse, except in the Arctic. Tough sourdoughs huddling around a primus stove in a double-walled tent pitched on the bleak rim of the world will exchange recipes; and it is a sight to behold, watching a bearded old-timer go about the solemn business of producing a meal. His gnarled hands are his measuring utensils—open, half-open, shut. The little hollow made when the thumb circles the closed index finger is an excellent measure for salt, while the space between the heel of the hand and the fingernails of a closed fist holds an exact level tablespoon of baking powder. But these masters of the skillet and Dutch oven cast professional jealousy aside when talking of Mrs. Plym's biscuits, for they are in a class unique and apart.

"Say! I only et sixteen of 'em and had to quit. Why?—I started floatin' off the chair!"

And any discussion of Mrs. Plym's excellencies was sharpened by the black contrast of her husband. Steve Plym was six and a half feet of howling hell on wheels whose only claim to respect came from marrying a wonderful woman. Every so often, Plym appeared in the upper Koyukuk country, fairly drunk, with the roaring determination of taking his woman back with him. And always, after a few fights with anybody handy, after a visit to his wife's cabin, Plym was hauled down the river again, quite alone, quite drunk.

"I told him to stay away for good," Mrs. Plym was saying. She shook a snowy cloth over the rude table, opened a tin of butter, set knives and a round glass jar of clear honey on the table.

"Him threatening to kill me if I got a divorce! Him coming up here time after time to make a fuss! Mr. Tietjen, bring a handful of snow to settle the coffee. . . . And now he's plumb crazy—wrote as how he'd either take me back with him alive or take me back dead. When I heard the knock I shot high through the door. That's the only way to talk to a man like him. Should've known it wasn't him, though. He never knocked on a door in his life."

BANTY TIETJEN put the snow in the coffee pot, looked upward into the capable face of Mrs. Plym. The woman would have made two of the little man; she was a veritable Amazon, bucking a man's game in a man's country with her trap line. "He—Judas!—he wrote *that?*" Banty said. "What you need is a man around. Somebody to shield an' pertect—" The little man gulped. "What I mean, I'll come over and talk about it when we can have privacy."

"It ain't right," rumbled the voice of the Big One, "a woman tendin' a trap-line. You need somebody that's—well, *strong*. I'll sort of drop around soon and talk it over. Some time when the place ain't cluttered with mongrels." The Big One ignored Banty utterly, and glared at the St. Bernard. "I always claimed the place for a dog was outside the house."

"Well, boys," said Mrs. Plym brightly, "sit up and set to."

The open oven door released a celestial odor that, mixing with the aroma of coffee, made Banty Tietjen suddenly aware of his acute hunger. His utter weariness seemed to melt away. He even forgot, for the nonce, his hatred for the Big One.

Mrs. Plym posed a moment with her masterpiece in her hands. She was well aware of her abilities, and not one to depreciate them. With the dripper of golden-brown biscuits in cloth-swathed hands, heat waves from those madden-

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ing morsels shimmering around her face, she made a picture of sheer beauty that was, to Banty Tietjen, perfect. Here was no giggling squaw who would soon get fat and greasy, here no frail and feminine thing of the type that occasionally alighted, squealing at the novelty of it all, from a plane in the summer. Here was a man's woman.

"Judas," gasped the little man. "Judas!" And then he let himself go. "Mrs. Plym! Maybe I won't never get a chance to see you alone. There are some people who don't know when three is a crowd. And so I'll speak my piece now!"

The woman tried to turn him aside with a remark about opening the round jar of honey, but Banty Tietjen lunged on: "I'll stay here and have it out with Steve Plym, and when that's over we can go down and get you a divorce, and then you and me—"

Once he had made the plunge, Banty Tietjen mushed on. The woman's *"Mr. Tietjen!"* didn't stop him, nor her widening eyes as she looked past him at the opening door. Even her *"Stephen!"* didn't register. But Banty Tietjen did stop, quite suddenly, when she dropped the dripper of biscuits, and then all at once he knew he was in a tight spot. Before he turned, before the bull-like bellow of rage shivered the chintz curtain, he knew another man, a third one, was in the cabin—Steve Plym, six-foot-six of howling hell on wheels, come up the Koyukuk for the last time to claim his woman.

TIETJEN'S scrawny arms couldn't ward off the attack. As usual, the husband's face was flushed with liquor. He seemed to fill the room with voice and power. The little man lurched backwards, spinning, from the first blow, and a mukluk-sheathed foot lifted him off the floor. The edge-plank of the bunk caught him squarely across the abdomen. He tried to squirm around. In the North, a fight doesn't stop with a knockdown. But the whole insides of Banty Tietjen were cinched in a green knot. He knew he couldn't move, but he had to. He heard Mrs. Plym scream. He dropped down and around off the edge of the bunk. And then if he'd had any breath at all he would have yelled.

The Big One was fighting with Steve Plym. A tradition of the North is the way the Big One can fight. The Big One was a peaceful man, ordinarily, but on three historic occasions he had gone on a rampage, and acquitted himself well enough that his reputation was secure in a land of fighting men. The six-foot-six of howling hell on wheels that was Steve Plym was reduced in the space of six-and-a-half seconds to a limp heap in a corner.

And then Banty Tietjen did yell, even without breath. Steve Plym had dragged a snub-nosed revolver from under his parka.

The shot filled the little cabin with a heavy concussion that strained the eardrums, while like the rumbling overtone of the tympani in the crash of a symphonic climax came the full-throated cry of the St. Bernard as Baldy leaped for the gunman. The dog had done no more than growl when Banty Tietjen was taking a licking. Too many times in the old days when the partners were friends, had Baldy seen the Big One pick Banty up bodily and hurl him playfully into the snow after the Big One had lost again in double solitaire. But a firearm was another thing entirely.

The woman screamed again. Steve Plym and the St. Bernard rolled over twice in a confused blur of action be-

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fore the man got to his feet. Baldy was hanging onto the right forearm like a bulldog. The arm was sheathed by the caribou-hide sleeve of the parka, with a sweater underneath, but still the pain must have been excruciating. But Steve Plym moved as coolly as if he were preparing to slaughter a sheep.

The Big One stood without moving. The woman stared with a fascinated horror. Banty Tietjen took two steps and clutched the table edge for support, his fingers leaving gray streaks on the snowy cloth. The honey jar was cool against his knuckles. He tried to shout, vainly.

Steve Plym pulled his right forearm against his torso, pinning the top of Baldy's head between arm and body. The man bent a little, holding the dog's body between his knees. Then Steve Plym carefully took the snub-nosed revolver with his left hand.

Banty managed to yell, but both his strangled cry and his feeble throw were hopelessly impotent. Never had the little man been so conscious of his deficiencies, never had there been such a surge of helpless rage at being born a weakling.

Banty Tietjen was the most surprised person above the Arctic Circle when Steve Plym's joints relaxed. The round glass-jar of honey didn't break when it hit his head; in fact, it seemed merely to brush by Plym's right ear before it bounded against the wall and rolled crazily along the rough floor; but Steve Plym's eyes crossed as he sank down. Banty got the St. Bernard off.

"Oh, Stephen! *Stephen!*" Mrs. Plym all at once was completely soft and feminine as she hovered over her fallen husband, sobbing pet words and meaningless sounds of endearment.

With the first breath his knotted viscera allowed, Banty Tietjen asked the Big One: "Did the shot git you?"

The Big One spoke impersonally to the four walls: "If some people would keep their heads closed, it'd save trouble all around."

All of the little man's hate instantly possessed him again. He spoke to the dog: "If some people would keep out of a private fight, then, by Judas, there'd be no cause for gun play!"

"You'd better go," the woman said. "You boys had better go."

Murphy's roadhouse was four miles up the river. The Big One again disdained the longer route around the end of the ridge. He headed straight across the flat and began fishboning up the hill with his long skis, the snow making a silver veil around his chopping sticks. The cold air didn't help Banty Tietjen's knotted entrails. He knew he couldn't go over that hill again. A nausea kept throbbing up at his diaphragm, snapping whatever strength he might have had left. He headed down towards the river. He knew he was licked. It had been foolish, anyhow, trying to compete with the Big One in matters of brawn. Tomorrow, he'd get someone to act as intermediary. He'd either sell his half of the claim or buy the Big One's share.

"Judas!"

The Big One had changed his course, was gliding diagonally along the hill. He came abreast Banty, passed him, and then toppled over as he reached the level. "Clumsy ox!" whispered the little man. The Big One got up and forged onward, a bit ahead. Banty smiled grimly. Still putting on the pressure, was he? If Banty wouldn't follow him over the hill, the Big One would go around, setting a killing pace. A pretty thing to do. But Banty was through trying to compete. He . . .

"Judas!"

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There was an irregular black mark on the disheveled snow where the Big One had fallen. The dog sniffed of it, growling. A few yards beyond was another black mark, a streak left by the edge of the left ski. Banty Tietjen forced himself to a waddling run. Yes. The Big One was favoring that left ski. The Big One almost fell again. Banty hobbled alongside him, took the Big One's fur-clad left arm.

"Lean a little on me, you big walrus," he growled. "Judas, can't even a bullet through the leg stop you?"

With the Big One leaning on Banty's shoulder, they went around the fingering end of the hill and started up the gulch toward their cabins.

"You're a wiry cuss, for a fact," the Big One admitted finally. "I tried to work you down, but it was me which was ready to quit."

"You? Why, Judas—"

"You outlasted me. 'Cause you could cook. You don't know how my belly has been givin' me fits lately, Banty. I never could cook."

"And we never got none of her biscuits, at that."

"What of it? You can cook rings around that woman—biscuits or anything else. She's fat, ain't she?"

Banty considered.

"Well, pretty plump, anyhow."

"Ye-ah. Anyhow pretty plump."

They trudged on, with the Big One leaning on Banty Tietjen. When they came in view of the cabins, day had broken clean and white on the Koyukuk.

Salt Water Daffy

KANSAS may be bone-dry (or approximately) but it boasts one liquid that all the inland states where champagne bubbles and hard cider flows cannot boast—salt water. Real, honest-to-goodness, tastes-like-the-ocean salt water.

The spring is to be found in the Sunflower State just off Highway 24—in case you happen to be driving by—and it's known by the name of Wanooka Springs. It rises, oddly enough, from the top of a "low, volcanic mound," which in itself is a pretty furiously quaint development for the middle of the prairie country. No other trace of volcanic rock—or ocean, either—for miles and miles of unbroken flatness. And the Spring is bottomless, too. Which makes quite a thing of it, one way or another.

For an unparalleled situation like this, it's always a good idea to go the legends of the redman. And sure enough, any really thorough researcher will find an Indian legend about Wanooka Springs. It seems that the Springs are a sort of left-behind branch of the Pacific Ocean, which once occupied the whole plains-basin. When the Great Father asked the ocean god please to go away from there, he agreed on condition that he be allowed to retain Wanooka Springs as a sort of toehold.

The Indians used to catch salt-water fish in the Springs, too, they insist, but no white man has ever caught any sort of fish there at all. The Springs also served—as all such outlandish natural spots are apt to—as a jumping-off place for bereaved redskin maidens. Well, anyhow, there really is salt water in the Springs.

—*Peter Kelly.*

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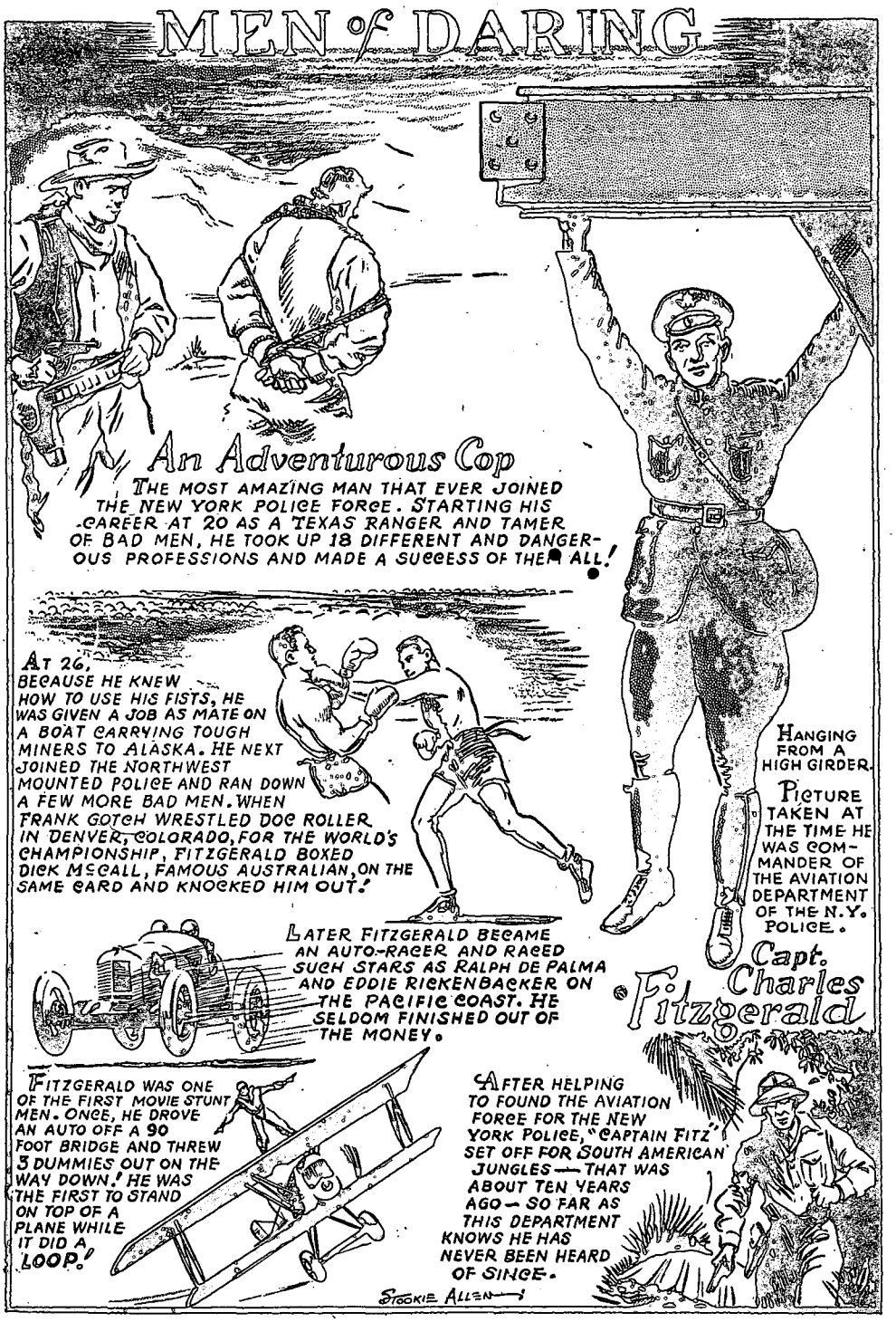
MEN of DARING
An Adventurous Cop
THE MOST AMAZING MAN THAT EVER JOINED THE NEW YORK POLICE FORCE. STARTING HIS CAREER AT 20 AS A TEXAS RANGER AND TAMER OF BAD MEN, HE TOOK UP 18 DIFFERENT AND DANGEROUS PROFESSIONS AND MADE A SUCCESS OF THEM ALL!
AT 26, BECAUSE HE KNEW HOW TO USE HIS FISTS, HE WAS GIVEN A JOB AS MATE ON A BOAT CARRYING TOUGH MINERS TO ALASKA. HE NEXT JOINED THE NORTHWEST MOUNTED POLICE AND RAN DOWN A FEW MORE BAD MEN. WHEN FRANK GOTCH WRESTLED DOC ROLLER IN DENVER, COLORADO, FOR THE WORLD'S CHAMPIONSHIP, FITZGERALD BOXED DICK McCALL, FAMOUS AUSTRALIAN, ON THE SAME CARD AND KNOCKED HIM OUT!
HANGING FROM A HIGH GIRDER. PICTURE TAKEN AT THE TIME HE WAS COMMANDER OF THE AVIATION DEPARTMENT OF THE N.Y. POLICE.
LATER FITZGERALD BECAME AN AUTO-RACER AND RACED SUCH STARS AS RALPH DE PALMA AND EDDIE RICKENBACKER ON THE PACIFIC COAST. HE SELDOM FINISHED OUT OF THE MONEY.
Capt. Charles Fitzgerald
FITZGERALD WAS ONE OF THE FIRST MOVIE STUNT MEN. ONCE, HE DROVE AN AUTO OFF A 90 FOOT BRIDGE AND THREW 3 DUMMIES OUT ON THE WAY DOWN! HE WAS THE FIRST TO STAND ON TOP OF A PLANE WHILE IT DID A LOOP!
AFTER HELPING TO FOUND THE AVIATION FORCE FOR THE NEW YORK POLICE, "CAPTAIN FITZ" SET OFF FOR SOUTH AMERICAN JUNGLES — THAT WAS ABOUT TEN YEARS AGO — SO FAR AS THIS DEPARTMENT KNOWS HE HAS NEVER BEEN HEARD OF SINCE.
STOCKIE ALLEN

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Kingdom Come

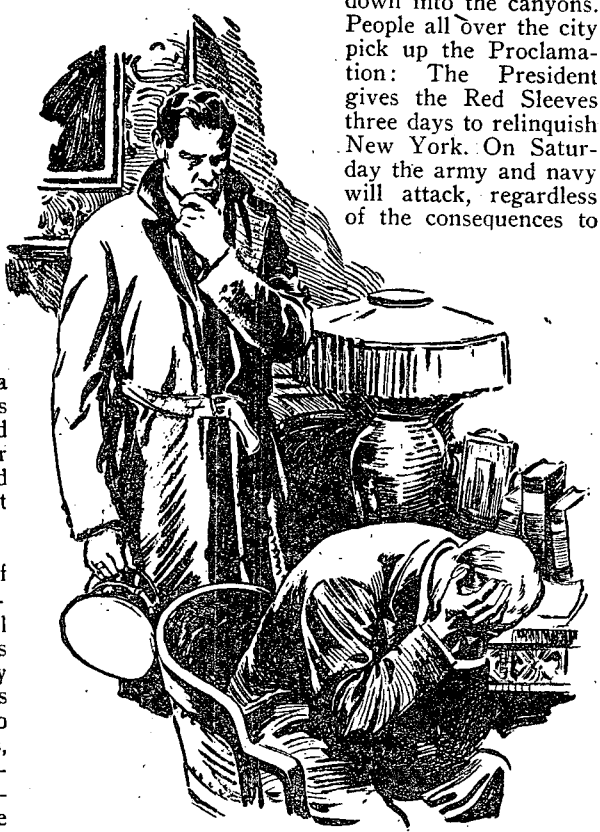
By MARTIN McCALL

AMERICA for Americans!" is the slogan of the fascist group that has, in a brief period of butchery and surprise attacks, taken over the nation. But, actually, this group, headed by the unprincipled financier, H. R. Dawson, seeks to loot the country and gain absolute dictatorial power for itself. By spreading undercover propaganda against the government, asserting that it is too clumsy and unwieldly to meet the issues of the day, Dawson has been able to create a great secret organization with armed forces in all parts of the country. General Ellison, egomaniac and ex-war hero is the nominal head of this gray-shirted red-sleeved horde; gangsters are his aides.

When Dominick Vane, ace federal investigator, stumbles on proof that this organization exists and communicates his information to the President of the United States, the Red Sleeve leaders, fearing exposure, strike swiftly. All over the country Red Sleeve troops march to victory. Power plants, transportation lines, communications, all fall into the revolutionists' hands. The army and navy fear to act because to bombard New York —the center of the revolution— or any oher city, would mean the death of innocent citizens. The President, isolated in the White House, is helpless. He has appointed Dominick Vane chief of a squadron which by espionage hopes to gather evidence against the Red Sleeve leaders, and, by exposing their real purposes, turn the public and their own misguided troops against them.

IN THE office of the Mayor of New York, "Lefty" Brace, ex-gunman and now a member of General Ellison's staff, gives the city officials and General Trent of the U. S. Army the Red Sleeve ultimatum. "If," says Brace, "the government forces try to wrest the city from the Red Sleeves, the Red Sleeves will, by gas and contamination of the water supply, annihilate the civilian population." The officials are forced to accept this bitter pill, for they have already seen the ruthlessness of the Red Sleeves and they are aware that Red Sleeve troops hold every bridge, tube and ferry line into the city.

In the study of the President, Corcoran, Chief of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, is convincing the President that he must act. New York must be taken by the federal forces, even if it does mean the death of a million innocent people. The President, loath to institute such carnage, but unable to address his people either through the Red-Sleeve-held, propaganda-filled press, or by radio, finally agrees to write a Proclamation. A few hours later hundreds of government planes drone over New York and clouds of white paper drift down into the canyons. People all over the city pick up the Proclamation: The President gives the Red Sleeves three days to relinquish New York. On Saturday the army and navy will attack, regardless of the consequences to



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innocent and panic-stricken civic populace.

DOMINICK VANE, knowing that the President is praying for him to succeed in his efforts to undermine the revolution so that the Proclamation will not have to be enforced, disguises himself and joins the Red Sleeves as a recruit. His rôle as a stool pigeon is discovered, and Brace, after tying him and then beating him horribly, takes him to the country headquarters of the Red Sleeves. There Vane stands before Dawson, Ellison and Moxelli—another gangster. They torture Vane in an effort to get information from him regarding the government's plans. Vane faints from pain and is tossed into a cellar with Philip Jaxon, Dawson's nephew who, earlier, has helped him discover the Red Sleeve movement. And just as Vane sinks into unconsciousness he hears the beloved voice of Angela, Dawson's adopted daughter; he feels her cool hands on his face. . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

THREE ABOUT TO DIE

IT WAS part of the cellar, but it had been made over into a sort of game room—this place where the prisoners were held. There was a ping-pong table, a couple of card tables. Around the walls benches had been built and they were covered with upholstered cushions. One of these Philip Jaxon stretched on the floor.

Very gently he lifted Dominick Vane's bruised body on it.

"The devils!" he said between his teeth. "They've been torturing him, Angela!"

Angela sat at one end of the cushion with Dominick's head in her lap. "Get me some water, Philip," she said, in a level voice.

A moment later she was bathing Dominick's face, washing the dirt and blood from his torn lips. "Take your handkerchief and work it under those handcuffs so that they won't cut into his flesh," she directed Philip. "Oh please be careful of his finger. They've—they've driven a nail into his thumb!"

"I'll get it out while he's still unconscious," said Philip grimly. "You won't want to see this."

Angela turned her face away. Philip swore softly under his breath. A shudder of agony shook Dominick's body and he opened his eyes. He saw Angela. So it hadn't been a dream of delirium. She was here.

"It's really you, Angela?" he whispered.

"It's really me, darling," she said. "Philip is here, too."

"Damn Philip," he said, and tried to grin. He turned his head to look up into Philip's white face. "You all right, fella?"

"The hell with me. Of course I'm all right," said Philip. "But what have they done to you, Dominick? Why have they brought you here?"

"I got caught," said Dominick simply. He looked back at Angela. He wanted to take her in his arms, but they were fastened tight behind him. He felt a sudden choking lump in his throat. He was never going to hold her in his arms again. There could be little doubt of that. "You, Angela—you're all right!"

"Yes, yes, Dominick. They brought me here shortly after I 'phoned you in Washington. You knew that I'd phoned you?"

"I knew, Angela," he said. "I tried to come at once; I couldn't."

"Oh Dominick, don't be silly. I knew you couldn't. Things had started happening when I called you. After that the phone service went off. But what *is* going on? Philip and I know nothing. They've kept us here for several days."

Briefly Dominick told them the situation in New York and the country at large. He told them how he'd been caught. "I had to take chances, with only three days to work in," he said in conclusion.

"What will they do to you now?" Angela asked tensely.

Dominick tried to smile. "Let's not talk about that, darling. Let's talk about the things that might have been. We may not have long. They'll be coming back for me when they think I can talk a little more." His voice hardened.

"Dominick!" Angela was sobbing. He felt the warm splash of a tear against his cheek.

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"Hey, this will never do," he said gently. "I played a long shot and lost. I'll have to pay. But you and Philip are going to be all right. Dawson will see to that."

"I wonder," said Philip Jaxon in a tight voice. "There are a lot of things to tell you, Dominick. Angela and I know too much for comfort."

Dominick turned his head. "What do you mean?" he asked sharply.

"It was Angela who found it out," said Philip. "Perhaps she'd better tell you."

Dominick looked at her and his heart suddenly pounded against his ribs. If these two had put themselves on the spot on his account . . . !

ANGELA began to talk, her fingers cool on his forehead. As Dominick listened he could scarcely believe his ears: "It happened after you left for Washington, Dominick. You'd told me what you suspected about my uncle, and while I believed that you believed what you said . . . well, just for a little, I thought you must be wrong. You see, he'd always been so decent to me. Somehow . . . somehow I couldn't take it in. Then he acted so peculiarly to you about Philip. I knew something was wrong. Still I thought perhaps uncle wasn't really responsible. It wasn't lack of faith in you, Dominick. It was . . ."

"I know, darling. Go on," he urged her.

"Well, I did a little snooping. Uncle was out of his study. I began going through things and—and, in a nutshell, Dominick, it's this. There are written contracts—proof of this whole scheme. Ellison is to be dictator; uncle and his friends are to control all the natural resources: mines, oil, wells, gold. They make Ellison dictator by financing the revolution. He pays them back by giving them all the government concessions!"

"You mean to tell me they have *written* contracts that state those facts?" Dominick cried. "Do you realize what it would mean if they could be publicized? If we could prove that grasping capitalists are really back of this whole thing?"

"Oh Dominick, it's my fault that it isn't possible!" Angela said. "But I was afraid. I should have taken them—run out of the house—hidden until I could get them to you. But they were shooting in the streets. I lost my nerve. So I left them where they were and phoned you in Washington. I found Moxelli's address too. But I didn't have the courage." This with a tragic bitterness.

"I wouldn't have wanted you to risk it," said Dominick. "But written contracts—!" He sounded dazed.

"Every one of 'em has a copy of it," said Philip Jaxon. "—Sort of insurance. But what I was driving at, is that they know we know it. I—well—I blew off my fool mouth to my uncle. After that they stuck us down here and I don't know what they mean to do with us. But one thing is certain. They aren't going to let us go free to tell what we know."

"So you see, Dominick," Angela said, "we're in something of a spot ourselves." She said it almost proudly, as if she were glad to be sharing his danger with him.

Dominick closed his eyes. If anyone could get a copy of that contract—! But who would ever know about it. He knew that he was not going to manage it, and he knew that Philip was right when he said Dawson would never let them go. How could word be gotten to anyone on the outside? They wouldn't dare attempt bribing one of the guards! But—there must be some way!

Yet as the hours ticked away the government agent was forced to admit that they were up against a blank wall. Escape was out; getting a message through was out; and Dominick, with his hands manacled behind his back, couldn't even count himself in the picture. Whatever they intended to do with him would not include a chance of playing any further part in the scheme of things.

Hot, feverish, exhausted, he lay on that cushion, his head in Angela's lap, struggling for a vision of some solution, until at last he slept. For days he had been going at top speed and now he could hold

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out no longer against the crying need for rest.

WHEN he opened his eyes it seemed to him that he could not have slept long; yet there was a pillow under his head now. He twisted around and saw that Angela was stretched out on one of the benches, also sleeping. Philip was hunched over in a chair, cigarette between his lips, eyes red-rimmed. As Dominick moved Philip spoke:

"Feeling better?"

Dominick tried moving his legs gingerly. He grinned. "I guess so. How long have I been sleeping?"

Philip laughed. "Seventeen hours and eleven minutes according to my watch. You must have been all in."

"Seventeen hours!" Dominick sat bolt upright! "You're kidding!"

"Not at all," said Philip. "You didn't come to, even when our charming friends from upstairs brought food. Angela thought it was best not to disturb you."

Seventeen hours! It had been late afternoon of Wednesday when he went to sleep. Now it was early afternoon Thursday—the second of the three precious days allotted him to do his job. With everything depending on him, he had slept around the clock. And yet, he bitterly reflected, there was nothing he could have done had he been awake.

Philip had saved some food for him and he fed him—since Dominick could not use his own hands. Then one of Philip's cigarettes, and Dominick began to feel really better. He and Philip talked softly so as not to disturb Angela. Philip had no idea whose house this was; but he did know that it was somewhere in the neighborhood of White Plains.

"And we have to sit here and twiddle our thumbs with the bloodiest slaughter in history coming up—unless we can spill the beans!" Philip groaned.

Dominick smiled dryly. "I might point out, my friend, that I can't even do any thumb twiddling with these irons on!"

Angela woke a little later. Together they talked in and out and around their problem. She could add nothing to the fast dwindling stock of Dominick's hopes.

"I suppose we might as well face the fact that they'll probably shoot the lot of us for spies," Philip said. "It sickens me when I think of the years I have liked my uncle—even admired him!"

"The lust for power is a terrible thing when it gets in a man's blood, Philip," Dominick said gravely. "Ellison is a fine soldier and he once was a man of very high character. But the chance for power has made a lunatic of him! And he and your uncle have come so far now they can never turn back!"

And, then, suddenly, men were coming down stairs again. Four of the Red Sleeves confronted them.

"You're wanted upstairs again," the leader rapped.

Painfully stiff, Dominick needed Philip's aid to stand. He turned to Angela. "I guess it's goodbye, darling," he said very gently. "Do you mind if I say it once?"

"Say it, Dominick?"

"—That I love you!"

"Oh, my darling." She was suddenly very close to him, clinging to him.

"Make it snappy," the guard officer said harshly. "You're all going up this time."

"All?"

"That's what I said!"

DOMINICK had always been a fatalist about himself. He had taken on a dangerous job, and death, he knew, was never far from him. He was ready for it. But Angela and Philip! They had a right to life. If he had not taken Philip as a guide that day in the swamps of Marshfield neither of them would be in this spot; and having got them in it he was utterly powerless to do anything about getting them out of it!

He managed to speak softly to Angela as they reached the top of the stair. "Keep your nerve, darling," he said. "They may try to frighten you with threats. But I'm certain Dawson won't let any harm come to you." As he said it Dominick wished

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fervently that he believed it. Dawson—all of them—were drunk with a dream of untold wealth and power. There was precious little they wouldn't do to reach their goal.

Angela's fingers pressed Dominick's arm gently. "We'll see it through somehow," she said.

They were taken back to the room at the end of the corridor. Ellison still sat at the big flat-topped desk, chin sunk in the palm of his hand, his eyes blazing darkly as he surveyed the prisoners. Dawson was over at one of the windows, his back turned. He didn't look around as they came in. Moxelli and Brace sat on either side of the general. There was a long silence as the three prisoners stood side by side, facing this tribunal. At last the general spoke in a harsh impatient voice:

"Mr. Vane, we have neither the time nor the inclination to battle with your stubborn refusal to talk. I have had you brought here to give you one last chance, of your own volition, to tell me what I want to know. I offered to trade you your life for that information. You refused. That offer is no longer open to you."

"I never counted very heavily on your keeping your part of the bargain," said Dominick coolly.

"I am not much of a hand at repartée, Mr. Vane," said Ellison sourly. "I will be as brief as possible. These two other prisoners, Miss Dawson and Mr. Jaxon, are admittedly in possession of information we cannot afford to have broadcast. It is not my fault that they chose to involve themselves in this affair. As you know, Mr. Dawson tried every way he knew to keep Jaxon, here, out of it. As a matter of fact he jeopardized our whole cause by trying to get him out of the mess which you, Mr. Vane, dragged him into. But these two young people have insisted on meddling. And so they have become so dangerous to us that we have no choice left. They must be dealt with as any other spy would be."

Dominick moistened his lips. "You mean . . . ?"

"Firing squad!" the general rapped. His gaze never left Dominick's face. He saw the deadly pallor that swept over it—saw the fear. "You have been a soldier, Mr. Vane. You must see that we have no other choice!"

Dominick drew a deep breath. "Yes, I have been a soldier, general," he said slowly. "I fought to 'make the world safe for democracy.' I have even admired you as a soldier and a man. But I would not have believed you could sink so low as to become an executioner of innocent people to satisfy your own selfish ends!"

"Selfish!" Ellison's voice cracked like a pistol shot. "Do you call it selfish to be ridding the country of the blood-sucking politicians and capitalist slave-drivers that have been feeding off it for years?"

"So you can put other capitalists in power?" Dominick asked grimly. "I know you had to have money to finance your cause! But you've hogtied yourself by getting help from the same kind of men you're fighting!"

ELLISON made an impatient gesture. "I am not here to argue ethics with you, Mr. Vane. I am here to pass sentence on you three prisoners. And that sentence is death!"

"Just a moment, General," said Dominick passionately. "I'm not pleading for myself. I ran a risk and lost. I'm ready to die. But these others are different. You're overestimating the danger they can be to you. They know that certain contracts exist between you and your backers. But the facts contained in those contracts are already known to me, to the powers that be in Washington. I'll be frank with you. My job was to find proof of these facts. Well, I've failed."

"And *how!*" said Lefty Brace unpleasantly.

Dominick ignored him. "But if you let these youngsters go, even if they shouted what they know from the housetops it wouldn't be dangerous to you. It will be shouted by someone else whatever happens."

"They saw the proof with their own eyes!" said Ellison grimly. "Their word

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would carry weight. They are relatives of Mr. Dawson's."

"But you *can't* do this," Dominick said despairingly.

"Don't plead for us," Philip said angrily. "Sure. We're related to H. R. Dawson. But I don't want anything from him and I don't think Angela does. There'll be plenty of lives lost putting him and his double-crossing, chiseling friends where they belong. I'll be proud if my life is one of them."

Lefty Brace smiled a thin, twisted smile. "Listen!—it's one of the Rover boys in the flesh," he said sardonically.

An infinite sense of futility swept over Dominick as he looked into Ellison's unrelenting eyes. "Let me say one more thing—" he began. "These two youngsters are not guilty of espionage. They stumbled over certain facts by accident. Imprison them if you think they are dangerous, but if there is any mercy in your heart at all, let them live."

Ellison's face was like a granite mask. "Mr. Vane, I am fighting for a cause—a cause I believe in with all my heart and soul. Unfortunately, for the ultimate good, it has been necessary for me to make deals which might be misunderstood. These young people know about those deals. In a few days I shall be dictator of this country! If that first victory were all, I would let them go. I am not a butcher at heart, Mr. Vane. But the information these two have is not only dangerous to me and to my cause now—it would also be equally dangerous *at any time in the future!* Do you understand that?"

Very slowly Dominick nodded. He understood. There was something compelling about this one-armed madman. He believed in himself and his destiny with an almost religious fervor.

"I cannot allow anything to interfere with my purpose, Mr. Vane," Ellison concluded.

There was a moment of dead silence. Then Angela spoke in a very steady voice:

"May God have mercy on your soul, General Ellison."

And through all this Dawson had not once turned from the window or spoken.

CHAPTER XIX

A WESTCHESTER GARDEN

"MACLYN!" Ellison snapped. "You will take these prisoners into the garden, arm a firing squad, and dispose of them."

A white-faced officer stepped forward from the door where he had been standing. He saluted. "Very good, sir!"

The other guards stepped forward—two for each of them. Something seemed to go dead in Dominick as they took him by the arms and turned him around. A firing squad in a Westchester garden . . . ! He couldn't quite believe in the reality of the scene. Four or five days ago none of them had dreamed that life didn't stretch out sweetly ahead of them. Angela, young, beautiful, happy at living; Jaxon, with his polo ponies, his dogs, his beautiful country estate; Dominick himself, holding down a dangerous job, but with that incurable optimism of all humans concerning death.

Now death was a matter of minutes.

They were being marched along the corridor to the front door. They were out into the open. There was the fragrance of the flowers in the garden that was presently to be wet with their blood. Oh—it was mad! It was one of those dreams that had plagued Dominick for years. . . . Yet strong fingers gripped his arms—their pressure painfully real. And Angela and Philip were walking ahead of him. He could see the imprint of their feet on the soft earth of the garden path. It was real enough! God pity them—it was real.

In the center of the garden was a little rock pool. Lilies floated on its surface and there was a stone figure—a dancing satyr, water spurting from the trumpet it blew. A chipmunk ran past busily, not six inches from Dominick's feet. It was late afternoon. Somewhere a bird sang lustily, with the joy of living!

This couldn't happen!

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Yet they were being led toward a high, boxwood hedge. Behind him he heard the rattle of rifles as a squad of gray-shirted men assembled at a curt order from Maclyn. Then they were being turned around against the boxwood to face their fate: twelve, grim-faced men with rifles.

Dominick could see Angela and Philip now. Angela was very calm. They stood close enough to one another so that she was able to reach out and touch his hand.

"Don't worry, darling," she said. "Perhaps—perhaps there is something after this. . . ."

Dominick couldn't answer. His lips were stiff with horror and they refused to move. Philip, very white, stood rigidly. His legs spread a little apart, as if to withstand the jarring shock that was to come.

Maclyn stood in front of them for a moment. He was looking at Angela. "I would give my right arm not to have to do this, Miss Dawson," he said.

"It's your job," said Angela.

Maclyn turned and walked back toward the waiting men. Dominick took a deep, hungry breath. He wanted all of the sweet air he could draw into his lungs. He wanted to hold Angela's hand, but the manacles prevented it.

And then something made Dominick's heart stop beating entirely for an instant. A voice spoke to him from behind the hedge.

"When the fun begins, folks, run, do not walk, to the nearest exit!"

Johnny Harbold! Dominick whispered his name, unbelieving, dizzy with hope.

"IN PERSON, not a moving picture," said Johnny Harbold softly. "Please do not show surprise, ladies and gentlemen. You are about to witness a very unusual spectacle. News, in fact. Man bites dog—firing squad shot as it is about to fire! Too bad you haven't any cotton to put in your ears because I'm going to make a hell of a lot of noise. *And run to the left*—because at this precise moment I am about to open fire with a machine gun on your right!"

Maclyn had almost reached his waiting squad. In a moment he would give his orders. Dominick was shaking. "Johnny . . . !"

"You told me to join the revolution, didn't you, Boss?" Johnny's voice asked lightly. "—Well, I always obey orders. Only I just had to kill a guy to get this machine gun. Won't the dear General be surprised?" And then his voice was suddenly sharp: "*Now!* Run like blazes!"

At the same instant, not a foot to the right of Dominick, the machine gun barked its staccato rattle of fire. The prisoners were running, running like mad. In one quick glance Dominick saw the firing squad go down like ninepins! Johnny kept firing. Men appeared on the terrace, and the machine gun raked them off. . . .

Dominick was unable to make much headway with his arms locked behind him. Once he stumbled and fell heavily, grinding his face in the gravel path. Philip helped him up and they plunged on. And behind them Johnny Harbold's machine gun still snapped savagely.

They were following a sort of path; and then, ahead of them, loomed two things. A garage with several cars parked in front of it, and a man in a Red Sleeve uniform running toward them, evidently attracted by the fire. He was pulling a revolver from a holster at his side. Dominick could not use his hands but he was almost on top of the startled revolutionist and he threw a football block into him that would have brought joy to the heart of a big-time coach. Down went the man—and down came Philip on top of them both. Philip had the gun now. He pulled the trigger as the Red Sleeve tried to rise.

Angela had kept on running. She was already behind the wheel of a big touring car. Dominick stumbled drunkenly into the seat behind her. Still they could hear Johnny's machine gun spitting death. Philip delayed a moment—Philip, who was unused to this kind of thing, was keeping a very cool head on his shoulders. There were three other cars there. Up went their hoods. Viciously Philip ripped out wiring

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that would keep them out of service for hours. Angela had the touring car moving when he tumbled into the back seat with Dominick.

"These cuffs!" Dominick groaned.

"You'll have to roll down on the floor," said Philip. "There may be tools or something under this seat."

Dominick got on the floor. Meanwhile Angela was driving the car at breakneck speed down the drive, out through stone gates.

"Keep her down to the floor, kid," Philip shouted at her. "If anyone tries to stop you, ride over 'em."

He had got the back seat up. He found a screwdriver and a hammer.

"This is going to hurt," he told Dominick.

And as they were tossed around on the floor of the wildly-swaying car Philip began pounding at the lock on one of the cuffs. Dominick's lower lip was caught between his teeth. Each blow of the hammer on the screwdriver sent the other side of the cuff biting into his flesh brutally. Sweat poured off his face but he lay as still as he could, bracing himself with his feet. And then a cry of triumph rose from Philip.

"Got it!"

Dominick managed to pull himself back on the seat. The handcuffs still dangled from his right wrist. But his hands were free. Philip had an arm around his shoulder.

"You're all right, Dominick?"

Dominick wiped the sweat from his face with the back of a trembling hand.

"All right," he said.

HOW that girl could drive! And there was no sign of pursuit. It looked like a clean getaway.

"Who in heaven's name was that bird with the machine gun?" Philip asked.

"One of my men," said Dominick. "How he got there I don't know."

"I got a glimpse of him," said Philip. "He was in a Red Sleeve uniform."

Angela was slowing down. She spoke without looking back at them. "We seem to be coming into White Plains," she said. "Where do we go from here, Dominick?"

With an effort Dominick brought his mind back to the immediate problem. The closer they got to the city the greater the danger there would be of encountering Red Sleeves. There would be an alarm out for them. It would be better to head north until they could find a place to hide for a few hours and map out their plan of campaign.

And even as he was thinking this they swung around a bend in the road and an exclamation of alarm escaped Philip. Angela was jamming on the brakes. Philip had drawn the gun he had taken from the Red Sleeve guard. Ahead of them the road was jammed with men, motorcycles and cars.

"We can never drive through that mob!" Philip cried.

But Dominick Vane was laughing. "You idiots! Don't you see? They're government troops! Slow down, Angela, darling! We're going to let someone else think for us for a bit!"

As the car came to a halt they were quickly surrounded by soldiers. A young lieutenant came up briskly. He started to speak. Then he took one look at the battered and bloody Dominick and what he had to say was stilled on his lips. Dominick rose and got out of the car.

"I'm Dominick Vane," he said. "Chief of the President's Flying Squad. Unfortunately I have no credentials with me to prove it—unless you would consider my present condition an evidence of good faith!"

The lieutenant saluted smartly. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Vane, I've been on the lookout for you. I'm Lieutenant Greer, attached to General Trent's army. One of your men—chap named Harbold—got through a report that you'd been taken prisoner. Seems he'd managed to get on the inside himself, and—"

Dominick interrupted. "Harbold has just saved out lives, Lieutenant. We were on the point of being put to death by a

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firing squad when— But more of that later. Point is, Ellison, Dawson, Moxelli, Brace—the whole crew of them—are at a house about fifteen miles back along this road. If you and your men move fast we may be able to catch the lot of them."

"Can you lead the way?" Greer asked.

"Certainly."

"Then let's go." He placed a whistle to his lips and blew a shrill blast. Angela was already turning the car. Motorcycles and trucks roared into life. Greer got into the touring car with Dominick and the other two.

"I have about a hundred men here, six machine guns, grenades— We can do a pretty good job on 'em, I imagine. Anyhow we can try!"

It was almost dusk when they started spinning back along the highway. Suddenly, off to the left, a great flickering red light shot up into the sky. There were clouds of black smoke. Dominick gripped the lieutenant's arm.

"The house lies almost exactly in that direction. I hope we aren't going to be too late!"

AS the cars and motorcycles raced through the growing dusk toward the leaping flames on the horizon any doubt that it was the Red Sleeve Headquarters which was burning was quickly dissolved. It was the big Westchester estate beyond question, and as they drew closer the wind blew whiffs of the dark, whirling smoke in their direction—a smoke pungent with the smell of oil.

"They must have been ready to touch it off at a moment's notice," Dominick said to the lieutenant.

"Why?" Greer asked.

Dominick shrugged. "They had to move in a hurry once we'd given them the slip. They probably knew we stood a good chance of running into detachments of government troops. No chance to transport records or other incriminating evidence that might have been there."

"You think they'll have gotten away themselves?"

"I think so, Lieutenant. We put three cars out of commission, but there were a couple of others at the front of the house." Dominick's lips were tight set. "If we could have nailed that whole bunch together, Greer, we'd have come mighty close to ending this thing right here and now. Without Ellison to command, and Dawson and the others to provide financial support, this little tea party would go up in smoke as quickly as that house is burning!"

Angela swung the touring car through the gates and brought it to a halt. Even at a distance of a hundred yards the intense heat reached them. Flames and smoke spurted from windows, upstairs and down.

The heat was blistering.

Greer ordered his men to spread a cordon around the place on the chance that there might still be Red Sleeves on the grounds. After that there was nothing to do but wait for the fire to subside sufficiently for them to approach closer.

Angela climbed out from behind the wheel and got into the back seat of the car with Dominick. She slipped her arm through his, but neither of them spoke. Somehow there was no need for talk.

It was nearly a half hour before the roof of the great house thundered into the foundations, sending a shower of burning wood up into the night air. And it was only then that Angela spoke.

"Do you think he got away, Dominick?"

"It's a pretty forlorn hope," said Dominick gravely.

They were both thinking of Johnny Harbold.

And later, when they were able to get close to the smouldering ruins, they found him. Dominick went straight to that boxwood hedge in front of which they had stood a little while before waiting for the sentence of death to be carried out. The front of the hedge had been scorched black by the fire, but Johnny's body lay behind it. He was dead—struck by only one bullet which had gone squarely through his heart. He had fallen across the machine gun which he had stood by till he was hit. He was smiling.

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DOMINICK picked up the body and walked back to the car with it. As he placed the body in the back seat that fury that he had known once before in his life came to him. "I'll be collecting for this in person, Johnny," he said. "I won't forget you, Johnny."

"Will they have destroyed those contracts in the fire?" Philip asked.

There was in Dominick's eyes that diamond-hard light that both Angela and Philip had seen there that first day in Marshfield. Angela, looking at him, realized that here, once more, was the man-hunter, not the gentle, almost tender lover of their brief moments of intimacy.

"Contracts or no contracts," he said, "I'm going to get the lot of them. Now understand this, both of you. You saw those documents. You can both swear that they did exist! If you both rack your brains you may even be able to recall phrases from them. *Keep thinking! Try to remember!* Because, if they are destroyed, when it comes to a showdown your testimony is going to be important!"

"What do we do now, Dominick?" Angela asked quietly.

"We're going back to New York," said Dominick. "I'm going to put you both somewhere you'll be safe. And you're going to stay there and sit tight. Remember this. You haven't the right to run risks. Your presence at the right time, alive and able to give testimony, may be of the utmost importance." And then he seemed to realize the severity of his manner, and for just a second he relaxed. He dropped one hand on Philip's shoulder; the other he slipped through Angela's arm. "It sounds like a pretty lurid speech, I know, but these are lurid times and the future of a great nation may depend on your being on deck at the right time. I'm aiming this especially at you, Philip. You've got to stay out of things until the time comes for you to do your part. We've got just a little more than thirty hours left. We've got to catch up with these guys by then. If we don't," —his lips tightened—"it won't matter much what we do!"

"Philip and I will do exactly as you tell us, Dominick," Angela said.

"Good girl!" He was crisp, impersonal again. "And here's Greer."

The lieutenant came up and saluted. "They seem to have got away clean—the lot of them, Mr. Vane."

"I expected it," said Dominick. "Lieutenant, I've got to get back to New York with Miss Dawson and Mr. Jaxon. Can you arrange an escort for us?"

Greer looked troubled. "I'm afraid it can't be done, sir. We have the strictest orders. No troops are to cross the deadline set by Red Sleeves until Saturday morning, when we get general marching orders."

Dominick looked grave. "I had forgotten. Of course you're right."

"I can escort Miss Dawson and Mr. Jaxon to our headquarters where they'll be quite safe," Greer said.

"It's important they should be in New York," said Dominick sharply. "I've got to get them there somehow. They've got to be on hand."

Greer looked at Angela and the color flushed up into his cheeks. "I don't like to disagree, sir, but I don't think Miss Dawson should run the risk of trying to get past the Red Sleeve sentries."

"I don't care what you think, Lieutenant," rapped Dominick. "There are issues involved here that would take a month for me to explain. But it's New York for the three of us—and quick!"

Greer looked fussed. He shuffled his boots in the gravel of the roadway. "We've got a car here, sir—armor plated—bullet-proof glass—loophole for a machine gun out the back seat. It belonged to some racketeers. The government took it over. I'll take off the army plates, sir. We can put on the ones from this touring car of yours. You might be able to make a run for it."

"Can you supply us with a machine gun —revolvers?"

"It's against regulations, sir, but I'll risk it!"

"Hurry!" was all that Dominick said.

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He stood gaunt, grim, staring at the smoldering remains of the building as the plates on the car were changed. Thirty hours! Thirty hours to find Ellison and the others and spoil their game—to founder a revolution!

Greer touched his arm. "Ready, sir."

Dominick turned toward the bullet-proof limousine. A rapid-fire gun was set up in the back seat. "Can you use one of those, Philip?" he asked.

"I never have."

"Then drive," said Dominick. "Angela, you ride in front with Philip. If there's any shooting to do I need elbow room!" And then he turned abruptly to Greer. His voice softened a trifle. "Take care of Harbold's body, Lieutenant. If by any wild chance we have luck . . . Johnny Harbold is the man who did it!" He climbed into the back seat of the limousine. Greer slammed the door.

"Good luck, sir." He saluted.

"Get going," said Dominick to Philip.

BRILLIANT headlights bored into the night, a highpowered motor hummed. They drove in silence, Philip gripping the wheel grimly, his eyes straight to the front. They were driving at a terrific speed. No need to worry about speed cops or traffic. After they swung into the Bronx River Parkway they didn't meet a car. People were not motoring for pleasure these dangerous nights. Once as they passed a police booth Dominick caught a glimpse of Red Sleeve soldiers—a man at the telephone. They would be phoning ahead to the bridge on upper Broadway. That's where the blockade would be.

Now, they were off the Parkway, winding sharply down through Van Cortlandt. Soon they were on upper Broadway. A scant few blocks and they would come face to face with the enemy.

Dominick took a heavy motor robe from a rack in the rear. "Take this," he told Angela. "Wrap it around your head and get down on the floor of the car. If we have a smash-up it may save you a bad injury. Philip, don't stop for anything—men or barriers! Smash through! We've got to get past for me to be able to use this gun."

"Right!" agreed Philip, between his teeth.

The big car was careening in and out of elevated posts. Ahead of them the bridge loomed. Perhaps fifty Red Sleeve soldiers were on either side of the entry. Machine guns were set up. Dominick crouched tensely by his gun.

"Give her everything she's got, Philip!" he said.

Tires screamed as they swung around a post; the car lurched and then drove straight ahead at the armed men. Dominick's nerves were steady as stone as he waited for them to open fire.

And nothing happened!

The gray-uniformed men moved back to make way. An officer in charge saluted! They raced arcoss the bridge without a single shot being sent after them.

"'Holy Saints!" Dominick was laughing. "The plates! The number plates off that touring car of Ellison's! They cleared the way for us. Those men up the line phoned ahead and had them clear the way!"

CHAPTER XX

IN TWENTY-FOUR HOURS . . .

IN the house on Fifth Avenue the Red Sleeve High Command was gathered. There were grave faces among those present. Corbett and Frampton, the two millionaires, were showing signs of wear and tear. The big rangy oilman paced the floor of Ellison's office, his hands locked behind his back, knuckles white. Corbett was huddled in a chair, biting restlessly at his fingernails. The pressure was on.

Half an hour before they had arrived from the house they had abandoned in Westchester. Now Ellison, Dawson and Brace were in a huddle. Corbett and Frampton were in this deal—yet strangely out of it. The three leaders were going over reports from various parts of the country. Dawson, still suave, still utterly calm, was reading them aloud:

"Cincinnati, Ohio——At six p. m. to-

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night a large force of loyal citizens, armed from sources we have not been able to ascertain, made a fierce attack on the broadcasting buildings of the national radio plant. So savage was the attack it was necessary for commander in charge to order gas attack. Special tanks of X2 were turned on attackers. Almost one hundred percent casualties resulted. Regrettably, citizens living within radius of half mile were killed in large numbers by fumes. Considerable indignation all over city as news spreads. Commander felt justified in taking extreme measures knowing importance of radio plant to our transcontinental radio set-up."

Ellison brought his fist down sharply on the desk. "The fools!" he snarled. "Better to blow the plant to hell than to turn that gas loose on innocent citizens."

Dawson tugged at his gray mustache and read on, in that calm, even voice:

"San Francisco——Mass meeting of loyal citizens successfully broken up by our men. Ringleaders beaten or killed. Casualties on both sides negligible. Radio and newspaper outlets for propaganda well under control.

"St. Louis——Troops and police withdrawn as result of Red Sleeve ultimatum. However, huge forces of mechanized cavalry connected to Third Army Unit laying wide net around the city. Reported that artillery bases are being set up within range of city. Can you inform us if government is bluffing or if they intend to fight?

"Chicago —— Huge anti-Red Sleeve gathering made up almost entirely of women belonging to patriotic and peace organizations. Officers deemed it inadvisable to use force in breaking up meetings. Used portable loudspeakers to drown out speeches. Two of these wrecked as women made hysterical attack. Men were weeded out of crowd and beaten.

"And so it goes," continued H. R. Dawson quietly. "There seem to be demonstrations in a great many places. Ah, here's something a little better:

"Pittsburgh——Four men identified as belonging to government intelligence service shot today. Feeling in coal-mining districts and factories strongly in favor of Red Sleeves. Homes of wealthy owners have been sacked. No report as to casualties."

PAUL FRAMPTON could contain himself no longer. "Look here, Dawson, what are you going to do about all these demonstrations against us? What difference does it make if the coal miners and factory workers are for us? They've always been on the left, haven't they? We've been stalling for two days. Why hasn't Ellison moved on Washington? What are we waiting for?"

Ellison cut him short: "Just a minute, Frampton. The government troops can't take New York or any other city we control! They may do a lot of damage but we can hold *anything* once we turn loose this gas of ours!"

"And commit suicide ourselves!" Frampton cried, shaken.

"Don't be a fool," the general snapped. "We've been soft-pedaling as much as we can because we don't want any more bloodshed than is necessary. We want the people with us. And when they are we won't have to worry about government troops. What's a little shell fire? What are a few airplane raids? We control the main bases of supplies, don't we? They can't feed armies off the countryside forever! We've got railroads in our control. Wait till their army and navy have done a little starving and then we'll see how tough they are. We can stand the gaff. But they won't be able to!"

"I saw those battleships in the harbor when we came in," said Frampton, sucking in his breath between his teeth. "When they open fire . . ."

"They'll blow down a lot of tall buildings on their own people," said Ellison sharply. "Look, Frampton, if you're going to have a case of nerves, go somewhere else to have it."

Lefty Brace cleared his throat. A cigarette dangled between his lips and his shrewd eyes were fixed thoughtfully on the big glass chandelier overhead.

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"It seems to me," he said, "that this would be a swell spot for a smart move." Nobody spoke. Apparently they all had a good deal of respect for this little red-headed man who had done so much of their planning for them. Brace flicked the ash from his cigarette and went on. "Everything the general says is true. We don't have to worry much about force. But we do have to worry about public feeling. The President has issued his Proclamation. It's a pretty fine, high-sounding piece of business. '. . . sworn to uphold the constitution and will do so with men and guns. . .' And all that hooey. Well, maybe he'll take a shot at it. And if he does—win, lose or draw—people are going to have a feeling of admiration for him." Brace looked around at them and grinned.

"Now here's my idea and it's a honey. Let's assume, for the moment, that Saturday morning the government forces will attack. Now suppose, tomorrow, before that attack the General here addresses a huge mass meeting in New York with a nation wide radio hook-up. Let him talk to 'em like a father. We've got our high-sounding phrases too. '*America for Americans.*' We are for the people. We want to lift the yoke of capitalistic oppression and political skullduggery from their necks. We don't want bloodshed unless it is forced on us. But if it is forced on us—if the government attacks—the awful loss of life resulting will not be our fault. Now—let Ellison make an appeal to the people for peace! Let him point out that, for all his oratory, the President is really just trying to keep himself in office!" Brace paused and glanced at the general.

"We're selling you to the people, General. And what could be better than for you to make this appeal to them on the eve of a great catastrophe which your enemies are about to bring on the people!" He looked around him. "Well, how do you like it?"

"I think it's a splendid idea, Brace," said Ellison. "It will swing many people our way; and if the attack comes we will have planted the notion in their minds that it is the government that is at fault. I believe we'll get millions of additional supporters."

Brace checked a smile. "I thought you'd see it that way, General." He looked at Dawson. These two knew the general's weakness for the limelight, but they also knew the power of his impassioned and very sincere oratory.

Dawson nodded slowly. "It has my okay, Brace."

"We'll draw it as fine as we can," said Brace. "Hold it late tomorrow night, just a few hours before the threatened attack. It'll leave no time for any kind of counter-propaganda. I suggest Central Park for the mass meeting. We'll have a platform, huge amplifiers, and our engineers can arrange to bring the speech into every home in the country. All the people are listening to their radios these days."

Dawson chuckled. "It's really a stroke of genius," he said.

JUST about the time when Lefty Brace was proposing his great propaganda scheme, a bullet-proof limousine drew up opposite the side-street rectory of one of Fifth Avenues most famous churches. It must have been a strange sight, if there was anyone to see it, when the three occupants of the car got out and headed for the door to the rectory, one of them bringing up the rear with a rapid fire gun held firmly in his hands. Dominick was on the lookout for anything, but the way was clear. It was he who rang the bell that a frightened-looking maid answered.

"Tell Doctor Pancote that I must see him at once," said Dominick.

The maid stood rooted to the floor, staring horrorstruck at the machine gun.

"Hurry!" Dominick said harshly. He herded Angela and Philip into the vestibule and closed the door behind them. The maid turned on her heel and literally ran.

A moment later a kindly old man of about seventy, dressed in the black garb and white collar of his profession came out to them. He had a deeply-lined face, a very firm mouth, and gentle, tragic eyes,

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but eyes that could, upon occasion, flash fire. He looked puzzled for an instant and then his face brightened.

"Dominick Vane!"

"Doctor Pancote, I've come here because I'm in trouble."

"You're always welcome for any reason, my son," said the minister gently.

"Miss Dawson, Mr. Jaxon—this is Doctor Pancote. He was my chaplain overseas. A grander guy never lived."

"Come in, all of you. I'll call Mrs. Pancote. She hasn't been well. The dreadful state of things, Dominick! Several of the young men in my parish have been murdered."

"Doctor, there isn't time for talk," said Dominick. "It's been so long since I've seen you. I've got to cover a lot of ground. I'm a government agent these days. Right now I have a fighting chance to crack this revolution wide open!"

"Praise God!" said the old man reverently.

"These two young people are terribly important to the government cause, Doctor. So important that if they were to fall into the hands of the revolutionists they would probably be killed on the spot. For reasons which they will explain to you after I'm gone, I must keep them in New York! I've been wracking my brain to think of a safe place. I thought of you. As far as I know there has been no attack on men of your cloth. Will you keep them hidden here, Doctor, until I need them?"

"They can stay here and welcome."

"I must warn you, Doctor, it may be dangerous. If it is found out that they are here . . ."

The old man held up his hand. "I have hoped a way would show itself for me to serve. I am very proud to have this trust placed in me, my son."

"You must warn every member of your household not to mention their presence. In these days, Doctor, you cannot trust *anyone*. And you two," he said, turning to Philip and Angela, "—if the Doctor has callers, stay out of sight. And be ready when I need you. Get as much rest as you possibly can, you two. And now I'm off."

He turned, stopped abruptly, and turned back. "Angela," he said. For a moment she was in his arms. For a moment her lips were against his.

"God keep you, my darling," she whispered.

"And you," said Dominick—and was gone.

A LITTLE later the incriminating limousine had been deserted blocks from the rectory, and Dominick was hurrying across town toward the public library. In fifteen minutes its doors would be closed and he would have to wait till morning if he were to collect any messages that might have been left by Dugan or Ives.

He just made it and he was still panting for breath when he took down Volume II of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and began to ruffle through its pages. Presently his pulse quickened. He had come upon a rather lengthy annotation in one of the margins. Dugan! A message written that day—only ten minutes before!

As he read his eyes picked out key words here and there: *—mass meeting—Ellison—hope to swing millions to cause before attack—last minute—no chance for government propaganda to follow—don't dare try getting information through myself—being followed—*

* * *

The watch on the deck of a destroyer off Forty-second Street leaned over the rail, listening. Presently he stood erect and loosened the revolver in the holster at his side. He called softly to the officer of the watch who stood a little farther down the deck.

"Someone swimming toward us, sir."

The strokes of a swimmer were clearly audible now drawing closer in the darkness. The officer and the sailor stood with weapons ready as the swimmer came alongside, gripped the edge of the lowered gangway, and pulled himself out of the water.

"Stay where you are," said the officer,

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"if you don't want a bullet in your head."

The swimmer raised his hands, but came up the ladder. "Put away those guns and take me to your commanding officer," he said in a voice of authority.

"What's your business?"

"I haven't time to answer questions," said the swimmer. "Put me in irons, do anything you please, but take me to your commanding officer!"

A few minutes later the dripping wet man was ushered into the commandant's cabin.

"My name is Dominick Vane," he said. "Possibly you know who I am. I need your help—and at once."

Three-quarters of an hour later Dominick, in dry clothes, with a heavy navy overcoat covering him, stood on the deck of an airplane-carrier down the harbor. The motor of a plane on the deck roared lustily. Presently the pilot signaled Dominick and he pulled himself up into the observer's cockpit. A moment later they were in the sky, headed through the starless night toward Washington.

Twenty-six hours left!

* * *

The White House,
Washington, D. C.

A very imperfect method of communication had been established between the nation's capitol and the threatened metropolis on Manhattan Island. The battleships, waiting in New York harbor for the President's order to commence firing, were broadcasting messages by wireless in secret code to the Navy Department in Washington. There was little enough for them to report. Strict orders from the President made it impossible for any men to go ashore, although agents from the Department of Naval Intelligence were at work. However, there was little news coming out of the city—except the bad news that it was sewed-up tight by the Red Sleeves.

But this night a message came which sent the powers that be scurrying to the President's study in the White House. Dominick Vane was on his way from New York with vital information. Corcoran, General Barrett, Admiral Hewitt, the members of the President's cabinet—all waited for the man on whom their waning hope rested.

It was after midnight when Vane arrived in Washington to find himself met by an enormous escort of motorcycle police, state troopers, and an army car with guards on the running boards. The administration was taking no chances of his running into danger between the landing field and the conference room.

Corcoran had managed it so that he was standing near the door when Vane came into the study.

"You're okay, Nick?"

"Okay, Corky." And these two men who had fought shoulder to shoulder for so long looked deep into each other's eyes for an instant.

"I knew you would be," he said.

Then Dominick crossed to where the President waited. He was shocked to see the change in the Chief Executive. The man seemed twenty years older. He leaned with one hand on his desk, as if his legs were too weak to support him. And in his hollow eyes there was a light of such pathetic eagerness that Dominick felt the muscles of his throat contract painfully. But the President's voice was quite steady as he said, "Well, Vane . . . ?"

Dominick swallowed hard. "Mr. President, I wish I could report complete success to you, but I can't. The thing that has brought me here is not news that will help you. Ellison and his smart friends have thought of a really brilliant coup. Tomorrow night, only an hour or two before you must give the signal to attack, they plan a mammoth mass meeting in Central Park with a nation-wide radio hook-up. Ellison is going to speak to America! And when he gets through, Mr. President, he will have thrown the blame for anything that may happen on you. He will have done it convincingly, and will probably add millions of supporters to his cause. Unless we can do something to counteract

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this before it happens I feel it will be far more serious than the most brilliant Red Sleeve military victory could be."

Slowly the President went around and sat down behind his desk. For a moment his face was buried in his hands.

VANE leaned forward, his hands on the desk. "Don't give up, sir. I've found out some extraordinary things. There are actually contracts between Ellison and his financial backers. Or rather there were. They may be destroyed now, because Ellison knows that I know about them. But I have two witnesses, safely hidden away, who saw them with their own eyes. If we can find the right moment and the right method we may yet be able to convince the people of what lies behind all this." Quickly, Dominick told them of his adventures as a prisoner of the Red Sleeve High Command. The President listened dully.

"Twenty-four hours! It can't be done, Vane."

"That's my job, sir, and I'm not giving up on it. But I can't impress too seriously the necessity for counteracting this mighty propaganda stunt of Ellison's."

The President looked at him wearily. "How, Vane—how? The Red Sleeves control all the great radio chains—all the newspapers of importance. There isn't time to print paper again and fly it over cities. And it wouldn't be effective again. We can't do anything without radio. It is the one direct way to the people."

"Then why not use it?" said a sharp voice. Everyone turned to look at Corcoran who still stood by the door. The color had faded out of his face but his eyes were bright as burning torches. He took three stiff strides toward the President.

"Mr. President, no man has the right to ask another man to risk his life for any cause whatsoever. But I believe, in your heart, you would gladly risk yours if it would save the country."

The President nodded.

Corcoran's voice shook with excitement as he went on. "They're pulling a grandstand play on us, Mr. President. But we, too, could make a play—one that would make theirs insignificant."

"Well, Corcoran?"

"Tomorrow night, Mr. President, tens of thousands of people will assemble in the Park to hear Ellison speak. Millions of people all over the country will be listening at their radios. What would happen, Mr. President, if, instead of Ellison, *you* addressed that throng—spoke over the air to those millions?"

"Corcoran! *How?*"

"It could be done," said the grim-faced Irishman. "They'll be welcoming people into that park to hear Ellison speak. We could crowd a thousand—five thousand—armed men into that mob. At the crucial moment you go up on the platform. *You* speak to those waiting people. Let Dominick produce his witnesses in *that* setting!"

"They'd mob the President before he could open his mouth!" Barrett said.

"Not with our five thousand armed men in that crowd," said Corcoran. "There'd be danger of a stray assassin's bullet, but you'd have to risk that, sir."

"Ellison will have a huge armed force there to protect him," Barrett said.

"I doubt it," said Corcoran. "It will be only a few hours before they expect our attack. Ellison won't dare take many men away from their critical posts. They'll figure that five hundred or a thousand armed troops will be enough to guard him against any demonstration from a civilian mob."

The President was staring at Corcoran. "And even if I were to die there, making an honest effort to get the truth before the people," he said, "it might turn the tide of battle."

"It would!" said Corcoran.

The Secretary of State laughed harshly. "It's a wild Irishman's pipe dream, Mr. President. We can't let you risk your life."

The President looked at him with a faint smile. "It's my life, Mr. Secretary," he said very softly. "Who has a better right to risk it, or a better cause to risk it for?"

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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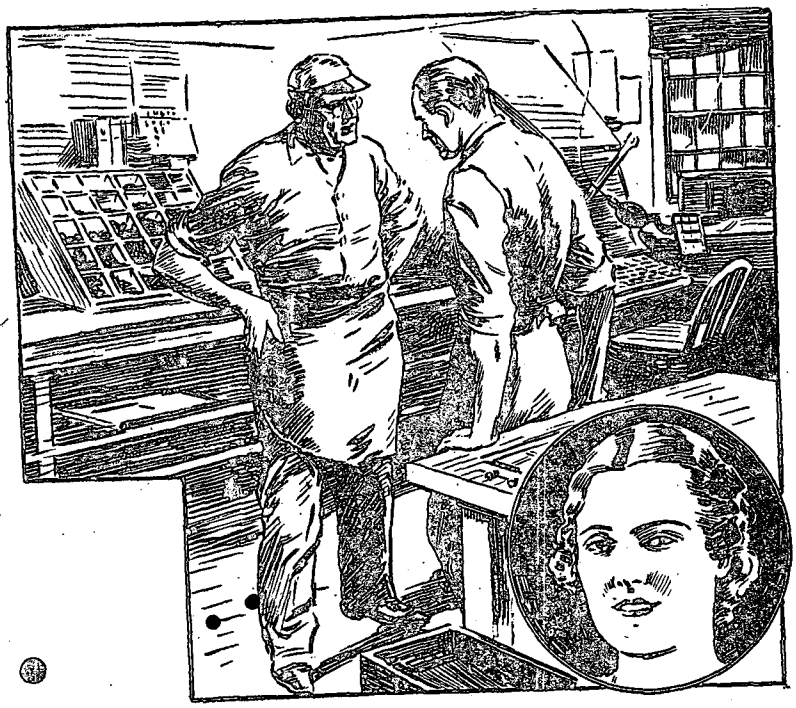
DEADLINE



By NARD JONES

CLARK WOOD let his hands rest loosely on the yellowed keyboard of the Creston *Leader's* ancient linotype machine. There was affection in the touch, too, for only Clark could coax the noisy tubular affair which set type "cold" and whose *a's* and *w's* often needed to be prodded down their slots with the open jackknife he kept handy.

Over his spectacles, the seasoned country-editor regarded the blustery entrance of Tony Harris. "What's the rush, boy? Don't tell me there's been a débâcle down town."

"Débâcle" was a joke between the old man and his assistant. A joke from one of Clark's innumerable tales of the thirty-five years he had published and edited the Creston *Leader*, "an independent weekly serving a flourishing community; circulation one thousand two hundred ten."

"'Débâcle,' now, is a lovely word," Clark had said. "Thirty-five years ago I liked it, and waited for the opportunity to use it. You can understand that in a little place like Creston the chances would be few. Then in the spring of nineteen-eighteen there was the flood. The dam broke on Mill Creek. Two ranchers were drowned. There was water and mud four feet deep on Main Street. And do you know what I did? I *forgot* to use the word débâcle! Yes, sir. I worked in 'cataclysmic,' but in my excitement I forgot to use 'débâcle'!"

Today young Harris didn't grin at hearing the word. He went over to his desk and stared at the new typewriter, his own acquisition because Clark always transcribed into type direct from notes or his memory.

"Something wrong, Tony?"

"Everything's okay."

"What is it?" Clark probed gently. "Had some words with Laura?"

"Well—" Tony looked up. "Yes, that's it."

"I suppose you been arguing?"

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"Why shouldn't we argue?" demanded the boy, rising again. "Is there any reason why I have to sit and listen when she gets some screwy notion?"

"There certainly is. You've heard the old axiom 'Never argue with a woman.' That's a weak half-truth compared with 'Never argue with a Drake.' "

"I guess that's right enough."

Clark nodded. "Believe me, I know. Laura is the daughter of her father, and John Drake is the stubbornest man in Umatilla County, bar none. One day he got mad and canceled his subscription—and do you know that for eleven years he never took the paper and never spoke to me on the street? Then when Laura was born I ran an item on the big event, and he subscribed again. Everything was all right after that. But imagine holding out for eleven years in a little town like this."

Tony took an old envelope out of his pocket. "Want a couple of paragraphs on the high-school team?"

"Let's not change the subject, Tony. You show mighty good judgment in wanting to marry Laura—but you ought to get it straight right now that there's times when you got to give a Drake her head."

"Not this time," said Tony stoutly. "She—she doesn't want me to take over the *Leader*."

SLOWLY Clark swung around on the little swivel stool that jutted from the base of the linotype machine. The old man thought he must not have heard Tony aright. Since Tony Harris had been a senior in Creston High School he had planned one day to buy out the *Leader*. He'd enrolled in the journalism school at the state university, specialized in small-town newspaper publishing. He and Clark had worked out a tentative deal whereby Tony could pay for the paper out of monthly earnings, letting Clark while away his retirement years on a California beach he had once visited and always remembered. The head of the journalism school earnestly recommended the deal. "You couldn't get a better small-town paper than the *Leader*," he said, "and you couldn't operate under a better tradition than he'll leave. I'm glad to see you interested in a little weekly, too, instead of wanting to be another Walter Lippman in an overcrowded field."

So it was planned—and Laura Drake fitted into the plans, for she and Tony had been in love a long time. They were in love when they graduated from high school, in love while they wrote letters back and forth from the university and an exclusive girls' school in the east, still in love when they came together again briefly at the holidays and summer vacations.

Clark thought of all this as he sat there waiting for Tony to assure him that he hadn't heard rightly. "You mean Laura doesn't want you to keep on here and—and do what we figured?"

"That's it. She says there's no future in it. I guess she picked up some fancy notions back at that school. She says she doesn't want to live in Creston all her life."

The old man reached into the pocket of his ink-stained sweater for a plug of tobacco. He bit off a minute piece and craftily guided it into his cheek with his tongue. "You can't blame her much, Tony," he said at last. "After all, it's asking a lot of a woman these days when life is so full of a number of things."

"You've been here thirty-five years, and you've had a lot of fun."

"Sure. But that's the way I'm built." He swung back to the keyboard. "You know," he went on, not looking up, "maybe Laura's right. For you, I mean, as well as herself. The world's moved on since I started the *Leader*. Maybe the day of the country editor is gone. I'm among the last of the tribe, you know."

Tony was standing rigidly by the "stone." He stared down at the smooth marble where he had learned to lock up a form when he was in high school. "Let her think what she likes," he muttered. "I'm going to do what I planned."

The old man got up and went over to the boy. One ink-fingered hand went to

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Tony's shoulder. "I don't know anything about love, Tony—but a lot of fellows smarter than I am have said it's the greatest thing in the world. I'm willing to believe them. And I know from personal experience that a man without a wife and kids has missed something he was meant to have. Women have an intuition about things like this. You'd better think over what Laura's said. Don't argue with her. Just think it over—by yourself."

Tony smiled into that wise, round face. "Okay, chief. . . . How about those paragraphs on the high school baseball outfit?"

"'Hold them until next week. I'm giving Sarah Drew's funeral two columns—and in a country paper a funeral crowds out local sports any time."

TONY set to work transcribing onto paper the news items he had picked up that morning. Like Clark, he had learned to rely little on a notebook. And he knew his people so well: their idiosyncrasies, their likes and dislikes—who could be treated lightly and who demanded a serious paragraph.

As he worked he kept thinking of Laura. The color rose in his face when he recalled what she had said about Clark. Staying in Creston meant following Clark's rut, she said. "You're afraid," Laura accused. "Afraid to go into the city and get a reporter's job and work up. You know that here in Creston you can drop into an easy berth you're sure of handling."

Afraid! Afraid, she had said. As if country-editing and reporting wasn't the greatest training in the world for metropolitan journalism! As if the finest journalists in the world hadn't been country newspapermen, and still were at heart.

"Writing the same names over and over, week after week," Laura said. "'Sim Barnes reports that the winter wheat looks good, and the price is firming up.' . . . 'Mrs. Jeremiah Fraser has been re-elected president of the Saturday Afternoon Club for the fourteenth consecutive term.'"

Furiously Tony pounded the typewriter, trying to drown out the echo of Laura's cool, precise tones. How, he wondered, could he be in love with such a tormentor?

But there it was.

That night they drove to Pendleton to see a movie. On the way back the moon was high and clear, the highway deserted. Tony turned off his lights and drove by the moonlight. The ribbon of asphalt was as clear and gleaming as silver.

They never talked much on a night like this. After a while Laura reached out and turned on the radio, found a vein of soft rhythm, then rested her head on Tony's shoulder. The band was coming to them from the Mark Hopkins in San Francisco.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful to be there now?"

"Not as wonderful as to be right here," Tony said. "But there's no reason we can't go down there on our honeymoon." He spoke cautiously, feeling her out. "When shall it be, darling?"

"That's up to you."

"Let's say some time next month. We'll drive to California. . . ."

"And then what?"

"Why, just as we planned."

He felt Laura's head leave his shoulder. For a long moment she did not answer. Then: "But, Tony, we went over all that this afternoon."

"Sure," said Tony good naturedly. "You told me what you thought, and I told you what I thought."

"And of course I was wrong and you were right."

"But, darling, you don't seem to understand that—" He did not go on. The air around him had grown suddenly chill. Laura reached out and snapped off the music, as if his voice might be coming out of the radio.

"I understand this, Tony Harris: I don't want to be tied down in Creston as the wife of the man who runs the paper."

"You think Clark Wood is a failure, Laura. But he's not. Do you realize he's really the biggest newspaperman in the state, and one of the greatest country editors in the whole United States? He's the biggest kind of a success. Why, his edi-

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torial paragraphs are picked up by every newspaper around."

"Yes, picked up free."

"That doesn't alter the fact that they're good enough to pick up. And he could have syndicated his stuff if he'd wanted to push it. When the *Literary Digest* used to quote news paragraphs the *Leader* had a better record than even the big city papers."

Laura said: "You're arguing with yourself, Tony. In a minute you'll be saying that the country editor exercises a great influence in the community."

"That's perfectly true, too!"

"Oh, Tony! Can't you see that this isn't just a selfish whim of mine? I'm arguing for you, not just for myself. I'd love you no matter what you were, or where you were. But you wouldn't really be satisfied in Clark Wood's shoes. Right now you're worshipping him. But you'll grow old, and you'll get bitter. You'll hate me because marrying me made you settle down in Creston with a weekly newspaper."

"That's a lot of fig juice, Laura."

"You'll be the one to drink it."

Tony could feel his palms growing damp as he clutched the wheel. His chest felt funny. It felt all gone inside as if something had reached down and lifted out his heart and his lungs and left nothing at all. "If—if I stuck to my idea, would you—go ahead with our plans, Laura?"

It seemed years before she answered. "I'd still love you, Tony. But—I'd have to think about it. I mean about our marrying."

"Don't think about it too much," said Tony coldly. "Because it won't matter. I'm going to do what I planned—the thing you knew about all along, before you changed. It won't make any difference what you think." He turned on the headlights and drove furiously, then. He said nothing more until they reached Laura's gate.

"Good night . . ." He reached across her knees, unlatched the car door.

"Good night, Tony."

He heard her step on the walk. And then something happened inside him, like the releasing of a spring. He leaped out of the car and followed her.

"Laura!"

She turned, met his headlong rush with her strong young body and her cool lips. They clung to each other there in the moonlight, Laura thinking: *No matter what he does or where he lives, I can't bear to lose him*—and Tony thinking: *She's right—I'd be a fool to do anything but what she says.*

CLARK WOOD understood perfectly. "Y'know, Tony, I'm sort of relieved, as a matter of fact. Been getting more jittery every minute as the time came for me to resign and go sitting on a beach in the sun. I'd go crazy not being in this shop. I'd be crying in the night for the sound of that old flat-bed press. It's been too long for me to quit now."

Tony had never known such utter relief. "You—you really mean that?"

"Fact. And I was worrying about whether I was steering you right, too, Tony. You got a future. You can go to the city and show 'em. You got a nose for news and you can write it plain or fancy, whichever they want." Clark grinned. "I'll send you the rag so you can keep posted on how it ought to be done."

He came to the wedding, too, with a smaller-than-usual wad of tobacco tucked in his cheek. He kissed Laura and told her she was mighty smart to be getting a bright fellow like Tony out of Creston. "Only place you slipped up," he said, "was in letting him stay in the newspaper game at all. It's a hell of a business for a grown man."

"It's what he wants to do," said Laura happily. "And I know that with that letter you wrote the managing editor of the *Herald* he'll get a chance."

Ten days later, after an automobile honeymoon that fell a little short of San Francisco, Tony was having his interview with the managing editor of the *Herald*. The man was long and cadaverous and weary. While he listened to Tony he trimmed his nails with a pair of prodigious

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editorial shears. When Tony had finished he set them down and said:

"I don't give a rap for your training in the journalism school. Journalism graduates know too much about my job and not enough about what I want them to do. But your time with Wood lets you in with me. I don't care whether you know an em from a footrule, but I want you to go out and do what the city editor tells you and 'phone it in."

Tony tried to cling to the shreds of his dignity. "I appreciate the chance, sir. What—what's the salary?"

"You can call it a salary if you like," the cadaverous man said. "You start at a hundred a month. It may go up if you stick around."

Tony stuck around. The *Herald* was a morning sheet, and he worked from five in the afternoon until twelve or one—sometimes later if a big story was breaking. Then he would go back to the tall multi-family tower, and up in the boxlike lift, and into the two-room apartment he and Laura had rented. Laura always tried to stay awake until he got home, but didn't succeed every night. Of course there was a day off. But it's difficult to know just what to do with a day off in a big city where you don't know anyone.

Neither admitted missing Creston. And neither admitted it was more fun to drive into Pendleton to a modest movie house with hard seats than to walk down neon-lighted streets to the *Great Royal's* double feature.

Laura never told Tony that sometimes she thought she would go mad sitting in that two-room apartment; or that the reason she couldn't always stay awake for his homecoming was because she had been tramping through the shops all day in sheer desperate boredom. Tony never said that the *Herald* wasn't as satisfying as the *Leader*. Not that he wasn't getting on. They put him at everything, kept raising his pay a little, and at the end of the year he was doing front-page features with a by-line over them.

In fact, neither of them said much.

THEN Clark wrote that he was coming for a visit. When that news reached them, Laura grew more excited than he had seen her since their marriage. She planned a dinner at the apartment, and a dinner at one of the hotels; and Tony arranged for a few days out of his vacation allowance so as properly to show Clark a good time.

Clark did have a good time. As Laura said, "He has so much more fun out of this town, somehow, than we do. I suppose it's because he lives away from it. When he comes here he enjoys it because he's here to play—and he really sees it."

On the fourth and last night of Clark's visit Tony was driving him back to his hotel when the country editor said: "You and Laura aren't quite happy here, are you?"

Tony was startled, as we always are by the truth. "What makes you say that?"

"I don't quite know. Right or wrong?"

"Well—my hours are a nuisance. And it's hard to get accustomed to a two-room apartment. But we'll get used to everything."

"Sure you will," Clark said. "You're doing great. You're making the grade." Tony was steering alongside the curb in front of the hotel, and Clark shot a dour look at the resplendent doorman reaching to assist his exit. "This morning I got hold of some newspapermen I used to know. Thought we'd get together at a little dinner tomorrow night before train time. Two or three of them are from the *Herald,* and I want you to be there."

The two or three from the *Herald* were nonentities to Tony. He had seen them around, but had never been sure of their duties which seemed vague. They were about Clark Wood's age, yet they possessed none of Clark's mellow assurance. Neither did the four others Clark had invited to the Pine Tree Coffee Shop for old-times' sake. Two, Tony learned, were on the *Dispatch*. The other pair were either retired or at liberty, and which it was Tony couldn't determine.

They were beyond his generation and

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Tony listened mostly. It was curious how they spoke always of the past, except Clark. Frequently he mentioned his paper, his town, in a way that was at once light and proud. Tony was astounded to discover that he had once worked with these men.

"I didn't know you were a reporter here, Clark."

One of the old men turned to Tony in surprise. "I'll say he was! We were all on the old *Budget* when McMicken owned it. Those were the days."

"I didn't last very long," Clark deprecated. "I went back to the sticks."

On the way to the hotel to get Clark's baggage Tony was silent most of the way. Finally he said, "When did you work on the *Budget?*"

"About five years after I started the *Leader* I decided I was through with country editing. I sold out and came here and got a job with McMicken. But the fellow who bought the *Leader* couldn't make it go enough to pay out, and I had to take it back again."

"Is that the real reason you went back?"

"That and the fact that the other boys could write rings around me. I'm no reporter. Never was."

"Every one of those fellows there tonight envies you."

Clark laughed. "I doubt that."

"I was just thinking," said Tony slowly. "I happen to know that right now I'm getting more money than Lee Howison who sat next to you tonight."

"Lee? Well, some fellows just don't get the breaks. You take Pete Cromwell, he worked with us, too, in the old *Budget* days. Now he's editor of the biggest sheet in New York. Harold Morrow owns that new what-you-call-it magazine that's taken the country by storm. We can't all win."

"I'll bet that even Cromwell and Morrow aren't as contented as you are."

"A lazy man is always contented."

"And they haven't the satisfaction you have. You know what I mean." He turned into the street which Clark's hotel faced.

"Afraid I don't," Clark said. "Say, don't drive up to the marquee. Let me get out here. That admiral gives me the jitters. I can still get out of an automobile."

A moment later Tony was to regret complying with Clark's wish. He heard a sudden screeching of brakes. He saw one of Clark's pudgy hands fly out grotesquely. A woman under the marquee screamed. . . .

LAURA and Tony were at the hospital when Clark regained consciousness. White-lipped they waited until the doctor came out of the little room and walked toward them.

"He's going to be all right," the doctor said. "But I'm afraid I'll have to keep him in here a month at least."

"A—a month!" Tony repeated. Instantly he thought of that Thursday-noon deadline for the *Leader*.

He looked at Laura. "Somebody'll have to get the *Leader* out. You let it go for a month and the advertisers all slip out, and —and it's never missed a week in thirty-five years."

"That's strange," Laura said. "I was thinking the same thing."

Together they walked down the hallway to Clark's room. In front of the door Tony looked at her. "It's all right with you, is it?"

Laura nodded. "Of course. It—it's the only thing to do. You'd better let me tell him. Otherwise he might refuse, because he'd think I didn't approve."

It was curious how they were standing there kidding themselves, Tony thought. They both knew that if they went back to Creston he'd be the *Leader* man from now on. They both knew that, and were happy about it, and were pretending they didn't know it.

Laura had pushed open the dark, plain door. They saw that wise round face staring at them, minus spectacles.

"If you are a couple of automobiles," Clark said, "turn around and go back. If you're not, then tell that nurse there's no cuspidor in this confounded room."

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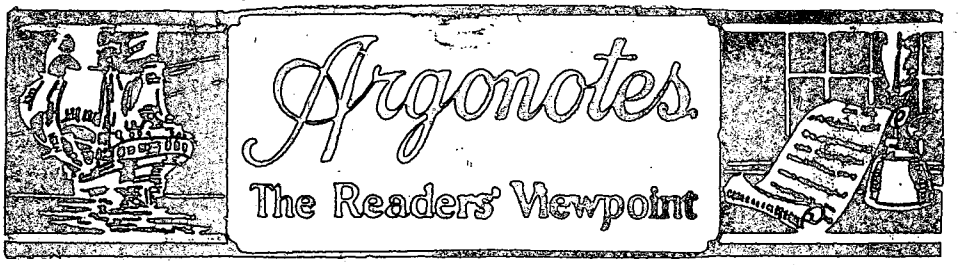

WE SEEM to be just the least little bit crowded this week. So without further ado, we'll plunge right into the mail. First to bat is an ARGOSY-defender who swings a doughty blade at one of our severest critics.

H. B. KICH

In reference to Mr. Martin Sullivan's letter in the Argonotes for August 14, I would like to add the weight of my opinion to sustain him on two points—and as for the rest of his remarks, trash! I do believe that your former method of grouping the contents page according to story-classification had the advantage that one could, without much search, find his favorite section of the book immediately. Also, your former habit of having a few lines of print at the beginning of each story was a scheme I hate to see disappear.

I am decidedly for the idea of having a quarterly.

Here is something that I have often wondered on: Why is it that ARGOSY in particular and all magazines in general have the absurd practice of having the issue that comes out on, say, the third of August dated the fourteenth? Is there some reason for this, to me, nonsensical idea?

Hoping that you keep up the fantastic story streak that you seem to be developing, I remain, a friend of the ARGOSY.

The Bronx, N. Y.

That confusing date business has often bothered us, too, and your quite justifiable question prompted a little inquiry on our part. We managed to pry a few helpful suggestions out of the circulation department, who have the say about such things—but their most urgent note was that: "Well, shucks, everybody does it."

Insistence on our part unearthed a pair of explanations, either one of which, or both working together, may have brought about the situation Reader Kich complains of. (1) A magazine is dated so that it may reach its most remote reader before the date of issue. People in New York or Chicago—the two chief distribution centers—hardly ever think of that. (2) People hate to buy anything that looks passé. Publishers honestly believe that a lot of potential readers would pass up, after the fifteenth of August, a magazine dated the fifteenth. On the seventeenth, anything dated the fifteenth looks old. So most weeklies are given the date of the *last*, and not the first, day that the particular issue will be on the stands.

If it still sounds a little irrational, we're sorry. It was the best we could do.

FROM the West Coast comes a belated defense and consideration of the ARGOSY Cinderella, *Z Is for Zombie*. Yes, Argonauts, we are about ready to stop talking about the Roscoe serial—if you are.

MRS. P. B. SARMIENTO

"The Last Crusade" and "Z Is For Zombie" were better than I thought they would be; although "Z Is For Zombie" was rather tiresome in style, the plot and the adventures certainly were great. Believe me, I was just as exhausted as the characters no doubt were, when the sixth part ended. There was so much movement and commotion in it that I lived with the characters as they went from one adventure to another. Seemed as though the author went into too much description and used too many words in describing his action. But just the same it was a real treat.

I love adventure stories of any kind.

I think all your stories are good, anyway. There are some that aren't worth mentioning but the really good stories are so numerous they outshadow the uninteresting ones, so that one doesn't really notice them.

Seattle, Wash.

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LOOKING AHEAD!

THE DREAMING DEATH

Dan Brice, the ex-Marine who has made the Whangpoo River his own particular battleground, learns what the Chinese can mean when they promise one of their own a death in the service of his country. Dan wasn't given to interfering in Chinese politics—but this was one execution he had to stop. A complete novelet by SINCLAIR GLUCK

REUNION AT KIRBY

Kirby was an isolated southern prison, remote in a pine and sand wilderness—a place of living death for those entombed there. But there was one prisoner whose spirit could not be broken, whose will to freedom would not die. This was Malloy, hard-bitten, suffering, smoldering with long-nursed hate. When the new warden took over, Malloy thought his chance had come. A complete novelet of two men who would not yield, by CHARLES GREEN

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MEN PAST 40

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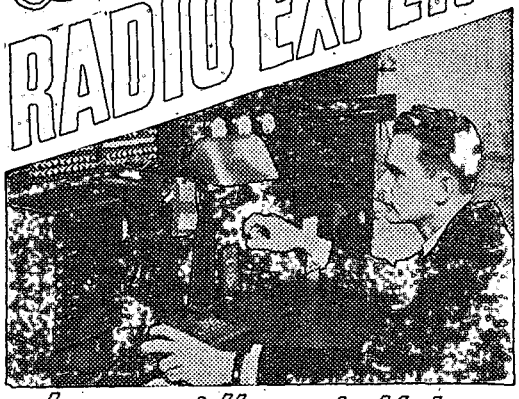

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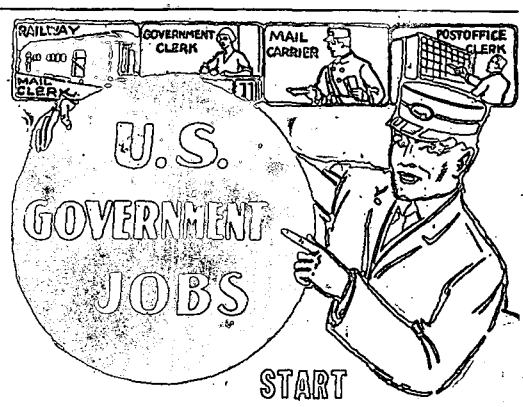

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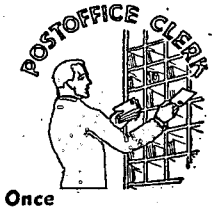

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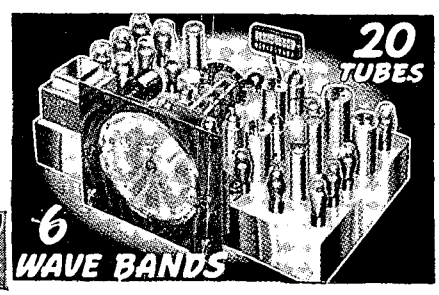

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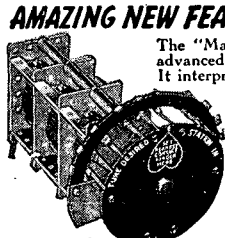

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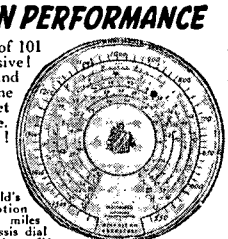
The "Magic Mystic Brain" is just one of 101 advanced features, many of them exclusive! It interprets your touch button signals and controls the electric motor. Nine contact fingers can be easily set to any stations you desire. Even a child can do it!



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Now, you can delight in the world's finest six-continent overseas reception with a range of 12,000 and more miles (125 to 20,000 KC.) Note that chassis dial shows only broadcast band. Then flip 6-wave band switch, and, instantly, five additional bands are projected on the dial.

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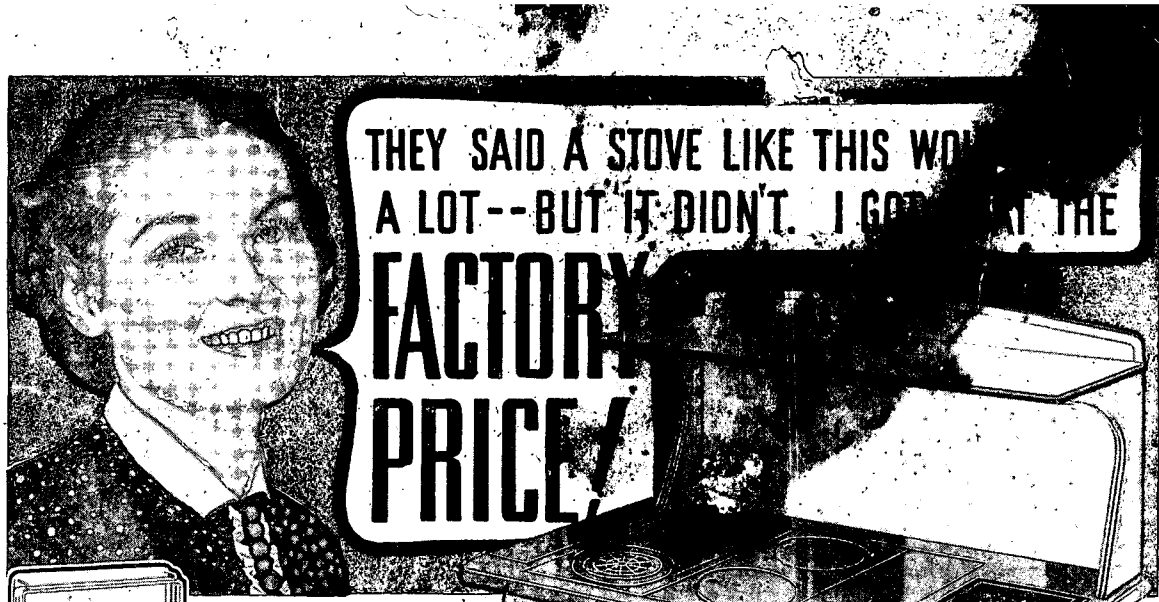

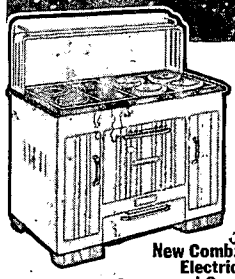

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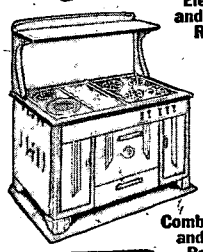

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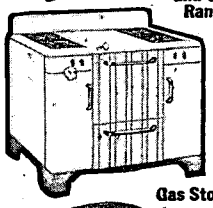

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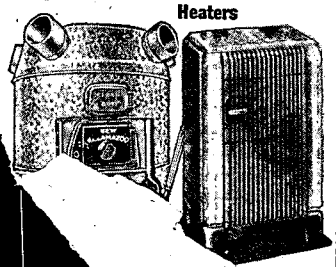

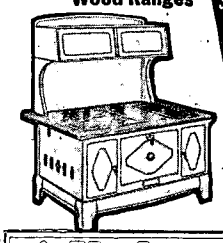

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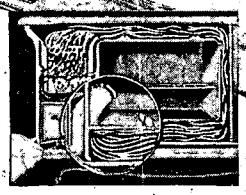

oven that floats in flame

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